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Back to the Balkans

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FORGOTTEN, NOT FIXED

SINCE THE DEPARTURE on June 28, 2001, of the Balkans' most iconic henchman, former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, to a courtroom in The Hague, the region has mostly sunk into obscurity. The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war against terrorism have long since overshadowed the graphic atrocities and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. Throughout the recent U.S. presidential campaign—a contest dominated by foreign policy—the Balkans remained invisible. Today, not only Iraq and Afghanistan but other hotspots in Asia and Africa command far more attention from U.S. and EU policymakers.

To be fair, southeastern Europe is unlikely to return to the level of mayhem seen in the last decade anytime soon. But the region remains fractured and capable of producing turmoil. Of the countries and provinces that experienced serious conflict after Yugoslavia collapsed in 1991—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro—only Croatia is now truly stable (thanks mainly to the mass expulsion of its minority Serb population, with Belgrade's acquiescence). Elsewhere, ethnic groups in the Balkans continue to eye one another warily. Only recently, with their wars long-since over, have Croatia and Serbia begun a genuine dialogue.

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Nowhere is the bitterness greater than in Kosovo, the troubled, UN-administered territory that is still formally part of Serbia but populated overwhelmingly by ethnic Albanians. In the five years since a NATO air campaign forced out Serbian troops and allowed the province's Albanian refugees to return, human-rights workers have documented chronic Albanian abuse of minorities, especially of Serbs dispersed south of the flashpoint town of Mitrovica. Meanwhile, the Serbs holed up in Mitrovica have compiled their own shameful record of persecution and violence. Virtually all Albanians are frustrated by Kosovo's provisional status and demand full independence from Serbia. Alienated local Serbs oppose independence. They boycotted en masse the parliamentary elections held last October and have generally opted out of fledgling, Albanian-dominated institutions.

Within Serbia proper, Kosovo is no longer the hot-button issue it once was. But the topic still generates political turbulence. International pressure on Belgrade to encourage Kosovar Serbs to vote in the October election led to a public split between the newly elected moderate president, Boris Tadic (who backed Serb voting), and the nationalist prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica (who encouraged the boycott). Both leaders have voiced strong opposition to independence for Kosovo, and there is no sign that Belgrade has eased up its support for hard-line Serbs in the province. East of Kosovo, in Serbia's Presevo Valley—where fighting broke out in 1991 between Albanians and Serbs—more trouble is brewing. In July, three Albanian parties demanded autonomy for the valley. And in the far northern region of Vojvodina, tensions mounted during the spring and summer after a spate of attacks on ethnic Hungarians and other minorities. Serbia's police and courts dismissed the incidents as ordinary crimes, not acts calculated to inspire hate. And Serbia's aptly named Radical Party capitalized on the spike in tensions to win victories in local elections held in September and October.

Also in October, yet another election in Bosnia and Herzegovina (the eighth in the country's nine-year existence) returned nationalists to power in most municipalities around the country. The main Serb party lost some ground to moderates, but largely because of corruption, not a desire to bridge ethnic differences. Turnout was dismal, especially among the young and city-dwellers, two demographic groups counted on to move the country forward. At the national level, politics largely

reflect the zero-sum thinking and ethnic polarization of the war years. Bosnian Serbs continue to undermine the joint institutions set up by the Dayton accord.



IB OHLSSON

Despite much celebration over the formal restoration of prewar property rights, relatively few Bosnians have actually returned to their homes. Fearing discrimination or feeling insecure, most Serbs sell their property as soon as they recover it. The country's capital, Sarajevo—once a symbol of Bosnia's multiethnic vibrancy—remains populated almost entirely by Muslims. Should NATO (or the EU military mission that will soon replace it) pull out of Bosnia anytime soon, renewed bloodshed would likely follow.

To the southeast, Macedonia recently dodged yet another ethnic crisis with the defeat of a controversial referendum. Angry over a proposed redistricting law that had been agreed to in closed talks between the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian parties in government and that transferred local control to Albanians in a number of towns, thousands of ethnic Macedonians forced a plebiscite. Had the referendum passed and the new law (which went into effect in August) been defeated, it would have called into question a key plank of the 2001 Lake Ohrid peace accord—and would have undermined the Albanian minority's commitment to the country's unity. The furor over the referendum was a reminder of how polarized Macedonia

remains, a fact exacerbated (as in much of the region) by the stagnant economy. Although Macedonian and Albanian political parties have been able to work together, they have failed to translate their accommodation into a wider dialogue. Previously oppressed Albanians now dominate much of the western reaches of the country, leaving Macedonians there bitter and fearful. Criminal gangs roam with impunity. With their deep links to neighboring Kosovo, most Albanians in Macedonia are deeply impassioned about its status. As some irresponsible politicians threaten to secede over Kosovo, a move that would trigger another war, the Macedonian government gamely insists that its security will be unaffected by a decision on its neighbor's status. But uncertainty over Kosovo's status is weakening public confidence in the stability of Macedonia.

OPTIMISM OVER EXPERIENCE

DESPITE THE REGION'S obvious lack of progress, foreign diplomats have remained relentlessly upbeat. Western officials regularly tout Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia as success stories, assuring themselves and the press that economic development and the prospect of EU membership have swept aside the messy national, ethnic, and territorial disputes of the past. Reality, however, keeps intruding. Last March, ethnic riots in Kosovo (sparked by a rumor that Serbs had chased Albanian youths to their deaths) caught international officials by surprise. Some 50,000 Albanians took part in the disturbances, leaving a score dead, hundreds wounded, and a few thousand more Serbs expelled from their homes in Albanian areas. In July, rioting in Macedonia (over the proposed redistricting law) exposed the glaring ethnic divisions in a country whose problems had been prematurely pronounced solved.

The highly regarded international representative in Bosnia, Paddy Ashdown, brags that the country has moved from the "Dayton era" of reconstruction to a "Brussels era" of integration into the EU and NATO. But it is the "Dayton era" refusal of Serbs to hand over war-crimes suspects that has kept the country out of even NATO's Partnership for Peace. In fact, none of the Balkans' conflict-affected countries has yet become a full NATO member. Similarly, despite legislative efforts, only Croatia has come close to joining the EU.

Bestowing EU candidacy on countries such as Macedonia would trigger badly needed foreign investment, but Brussels has demanded wholesale legal and economic reform as a precondition. Some of the countries have tried to comply, but their measures have yet to correct pernicious structural problems. Excessive state employment, obsolete technology, shadowy ownership, and poor transportation links leave most former Yugoslav economies utterly uncompetitive with Europe. Meddling by the EU has kept Serbia and Montenegro's two divergent economies locked in an inefficient union. Instead of benefiting from access to European markets or trading within the region, Balkan countries suck in high-value EU imports while selling off their few choice assets. Pervasive corruption, high levels of unemployment, and weak courts have left many people disillusioned with and disengaged from politics and public institutions. Most young Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Montenegrins, Macedonians, and Albanians hope to leave the region; so far, only Europe's strict visa regime has prevented more of them from doing so. Those who stay seem as inclined to nationalist bigotry as their parents.

War-crimes trials in The Hague, such as Milosevic's, have served the cause of justice but failed as tools for reconciliation. Serbia still has not come to terms with the magnitude of the crimes committed in its name, and it still chafes at cooperation with the UN tribunal (despite the fact that Belgrade would benefit the most from such cooperation, since many of the remaining fugitives work with organized crime and allies in government to keep a stranglehold on key public institutions). Meanwhile, the two most notorious suspects, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic—the wartime leaders of the Bosnian Serbs—remain at large, probably in Serbia, Republika Srpska, or Montenegro. Even if they are eventually handed over, this will not change the attitude of many Bosnian Muslims. Nine years of international stewardship and persistent division have left Bosnians disoriented and disheartened. A prominent Sarajevan quipped, “We don't live in a country, we live in a project.”

THE DANGERS OF DELAY

BY CONSISTENTLY denying the severity of the region's problems, officials have delayed tackling them until crises force their hands. Even after the July riots in Macedonia, diplomats downplayed the severity of

the situation. On the eve of the November referendum, with Macedonian resentment rising and the country's peace agreement in jeopardy, a jittery Bush administration finally overcame Greek objections and recognized "The Republic of Macedonia" as the country's name, a long-overdue measure. (The administration avoided the wrath of Greek-American voters, who see the name "Macedonia" as a theft of Greek heritage, by holding off recognition until just after the U.S. elections.) In return for Washington's gesture, Macedonian voters obliged the Americans by staying home and letting the referendum fail for lack of turnout. But the repercussions are still being felt. The prime minister resigned in mid-November, setting off fierce maneuvering between ethnic hard-liners and moderates and increasing anxiety within the ruling Albanian party. Outside government, ordinary Macedonians and Albanians remain as far apart as ever.

Ethnic tensions are even more acute in Kosovo, in part because of the territory's undetermined status. The United States and other members of the Contact Group (formed in April 1994 to coordinate responses to the Yugoslav wars)—France, Germany, Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the EU—must decide whether they will take the initiative to resolve Kosovo's status (left undecided after the conclusion of the 1999 NATO air campaign and the passage of Security Council Resolution 1244) or continue to dodge the issue until crisis dictates the course of events. In December 2003, the Contact Group expressed its commitment to launch, by mid-2005, a process that would determine the province's final status. The March violence, however, has cast a shadow on this commitment. For the moment, the Contact Group has backed off its pledge to broach the status issue, hiding behind the need for a "comprehensive review" of Kosovo's progress in meeting an array of "standards." Even if it decides that Kosovo's institutions have failed to meet the test, postponing final status will not change the situation on the ground. Kosovo will remain deadlocked by Serb fears and intransigence on one hand and Albanian frustrations and impatience on the other.

COOPERATION OR COMPETITION?

WASHINGTON and its European allies can still help solve the region's problems—if, that is, they recognize what is at stake and develop a

joint approach. Unfortunately, transatlantic cooperation in the Balkans, as elsewhere, has suffered over the past three years. Almost as soon as it took office, the Bush administration downgraded the Balkans portfolio at the State Department, causing many Europeans to worry that the United States might pull its troops out of the region. In May 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell tried to reassure his NATO counterparts, promising, "We went into this together, and we will go out together." But after September 11, this pledge of solidarity was subverted by the larger ideological battles that have so aggravated relations. On the eve of the war in Iraq, U.S. diplomats publicly threatened to punish Balkan governments if they failed to join the U.S.-led coalition (only Macedonia fully complied). Shortly thereafter, Washington and Brussels, dueling over the International Criminal Court, forced Balkan states to choose sides in their dispute (and offend one or the other in the process). Most recently, when the EU tried to take over military missions in Macedonia and Bosnia from NATO—assuming the burden that Washington has long hoped it would—negotiations were undermined by the acrimony over Iraq. Detailed "Berlin-plus" arrangements for NATO-EU cooperation were eventually formalized, but without the trust needed to make them work well.

Although the fallout from the wars on terrorism and in Iraq has heightened tensions between Europe and the United States, it has also increased the need for transatlantic cooperation and a firm U.S. role in the Balkans. Southeastern Europe remains one of the very few areas of the world where being American is seen as a plus among Muslim populations: Albanians have viewed the United States as their chief benefactor ever since the days of Woodrow Wilson, and, since 1992, many Bosnians have felt similarly. The Bush administration, however, has tended to see the Muslim presence in the region as a reason for worry. Several factors—the Bosnian documents found in the possession of al Qaeda elements, the continuing presence of some mujahideen in Bosnia, and Saudi funding of radical mosques there—have heightened such fears.

Washington must recognize, however, that neither Kosovars nor Bosnians, with their strong European orientation and pro-American feelings, make good recruits for Islamist terrorists. In his second term, President Bush should broaden his approach. Achieving

just, stable settlements for the region's outstanding issues will help insulate the Balkans from Islamist terror.

Should Washington appear to abandon the region's Muslims, the U.S. image in the Balkans and the larger Islamic world would suffer yet another costly setback. The fact is that Albanians and Bosnians will not fully entrust their destiny to any other international broker. The EU failed miserably to deal with the Yugoslav crises throughout the 1990s and often sided against Muslims. Even as it adopts a greater military role, the EU will continue to have difficulty earning their full confidence. The strong French ties to the Serbs remain a source of suspicion. If the West fails to protect the interests of the region's Muslims, however, it is Washington, not Paris, that will be blamed.

Whatever their differences, the United States and Europe share a recent history of cooperation in the Balkans, most recently strong Franco-American coordination in resolving Macedonia's 2001 crisis. The United States and the EU should build on these links to adopt a new guiding principle for resolving the region's remaining ethnic questions—a standard to apply consistently and without favoritism. Kosovo, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not all amenable to the same solutions to outstanding ethnic problems, but each should be held to a cardinal principle: the fair treatment of minorities.

After all, it is the collective sense of grievance among minority populations that, more than any other single cause, drives conflict in the region. In the 1990s, for example, the sense of Serb vulnerability in Bosnia and Croatia allowed Milosevic and his proxies to lay the foundation for ethnic cleansing and to attempt the creation of a Greater Serbia. No degree of assurance to the Serb minority in either Croatia or Bosnia could likely have deterred Milosevic from deploying the arsenal of Yugoslavia for his aims. But today the climate is different: unscrupulous politicians still seek to exploit minority grudges, but none has the wherewithal of Milosevic or former Croatian strongman Franjo Tudjman to defy the united international community.

It is hard to overestimate how essential the minority-treatment principle is for the Balkans. Without full consideration, for example, of the appalling human rights record of Kosovar Albanians—who continue to make Kosovo inhospitable to Serbs and other minorities—southeastern Europe will be doomed. The Serbs will demand com-

pensation in Bosnia for the loss of Kosovo, through annexation of all or part of Republika Srpska into Serbia proper; in turn, Muslims will demand territory for having been driven out of Serb-dominated areas during the war. Forcing Belgrade to accept an unfair Kosovo settlement without some redress for the tens of thousands of Serbs chased out after NATO bombing ended will burden the former Yugoslavia's largest and most populous country with a permanent grievance.

If Kosovo's indeterminate status is to end with independence, as the province's majority Albanians demand, then principle and practicality demand a territorial accommodation to the Serb minority. The question is how to achieve this with minimal disturbance to the region. Just as outright independence for

Kosovo would leave Serbs with a permanent grudge, so outright partition would enrage Albanians and create a host of problems in neighboring areas with substantial Albanian populations. A sensible compromise would grant Kosovo independence with substantial international guidance, declare the divided town of Mitrovica a unified "open city" with

continuing international supervision, create defined cantons and municipalities for Serbs (including key historical sites), and offer all Serbs who live in Kosovo a formalized "special relationship" with Serbia (with compensation for refugees who cannot return to Kosovo). As in Bosnia, Kosovar Serbs would get to retain their Serb citizenship. But unlike in Bosnia, the scope of "special relations" would be more narrow, ensuring that Kosovo's new sovereignty is not undermined. The fact that half the Serb population is concentrated in the north of Kosovo and the rest are more dispersed in the south should be no bar to creating Serb cantons. Just as Belgrade will have to swallow the loss of Kosovo as a whole as a price for its years of oppression, so Pristina will have to accept local Serb control over some Albanian villages and parts of towns as the price for its appalling record.

Such an approach would address the core security and political needs of both sides without forcing Kosovo's partition, the consequences of which would be difficult to control. Albanians would finally realize the dream of an independent, unitary Kosovo, whereas Serbs would

A collective sense of grievance, more than any other single cause, drives conflict in the Balkans.

get territorial protections—not just paper promises—for their people and religious sites within the new Kosovo. Leaving minorities tethered to neighboring states (with a “special relationship”) is hardly ideal, but neither is the current situation in Kosovo. Gradually, as both Serbia and Kosovo developed their economies and justice systems and moved toward the EU, the drive for formalized ethnic separation would ease. In the meantime, a solution along these lines would remove the uncertainty that currently makes progress on the economy and the rule of law so difficult.

Unlike the thinly disguised land-grab that Belgrade has proposed, Serb cantons in a newly independent Kosovo need not be excessively large and, unlike Republika Srpska, should not be contiguous (except in the north, where special measures in Mitrovica could check the temptation to secede). The exact dimensions of the cantons, their financing,

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their degree of interaction with Albanian local and central authority, control of key assets, and compensation for non-returnees would be negotiated among the parties.

How can Kosovo’s Serbs and Albanians, so embittered by recent events, be brought to agreement? The answer is by a collective

decision on the part of the Contact Group to move forward on status. The truth is that what the parties are negotiating in Kosovo is the terms of their divorce, not the future of their co-existence. Once they grasp that Washington and Europe are committed to resolving Kosovo’s status, the parties will begin to negotiate in earnest. The mistake in Kosovo has been to wait for Albanian progress in meeting standards to lead, step by step, to a negotiated solution with the Serbs. There is nothing in the record, not even the few examples of rural co-existence, to suggest that such an incremental approach would work without years more of delay. Kosovo’s undetermined status has left it starved for investment and kept its young, growing population angry and frustrated. This has only ensured that the greater region, Serbia included, remains mired in uncertainty.

Belgrade will no doubt resist independence for Kosovo, arguing that now is not the time to discuss final status and that independence will bring radical forces to power in Serbia. Neither argument washes.

There is never a good time to deal with highly emotive issues. Radical parties do benefit from rising tensions, but postponing a decision on Kosovo has only kept such tension high and given the radicals plenty of ammunition to exploit. The victory of Tadic, a moderate, last June suggests that Serbia is slowly moving forward after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in March 2003. But Serbia's democracy still has more to gain from confronting the prospect of Kosovo's independence than from avoiding it. If the United States and Europe can present a united front that includes Moscow (which has never truly risked its relationship with Washington on behalf of the Serbs) and offer a solution that contains strong territorial protections for minority Serbs and Serb religious sites, as well as generous EU financial assistance, Belgrade could be persuaded to accept a deal on Kosovo and not demand Bosnian territory in return. With Kosovo's status resolved, Serbia could finally move forward and focus on other overdue reforms.

As in Kosovo, the international community has for too long averted its eyes from the troubled reality in Bosnia: the Dayton peace framework has become dysfunctional. Bosnian Serbs continue to think that the stronger central Muslim-dominated institutions become, the weaker Republika Srpska will become. With no incentive to embrace the authority of Sarajevo, the Serb republic remains a Serb citadel, and joint, central institutions do not function. International officials have been forced to act in their place.

The solution for Bosnia lies in applying the same minority fair-treatment principle as in Kosovo. The few Serbs and Croats who live in Sarajevo today have been marginalized. Providing them an equal share of political and economic power would stimulate more of their ethnic brethren to return. A movement toward Bosnia's center could start to reverse Dayton's centrifugal dynamics and alter its obsolete, dual structure. As the successful example of Brcko, a formerly divided town on the Sava River shows, making Sarajevo an "open district" with protections for all could transform attitudes. Of course, getting the parties to agree to this will not be easy; the Serbs, wedded to the preservation of their mini-state, will resist, as will some Muslims unwilling to cede unitary control of the city they suffered in through more than three years of war. Hard-line Croats will also shrink from the move, as it will spell the end of their dream for maximal separation.

But the only realistic alternatives for Bosnia are either outright partition (a complex undertaking that would expose the United States to accusations of abandoning the Muslims) or a permanent international presence. Neither is a desirable outcome.

The consequences of partitioning Macedonia would, as in Kosovo or Bosnia, be disastrous. The scare over the November referendum should lead the Bush administration to recognize that it has consistently overstated the country's stability. Macedonia's vulnerability is no reason to postpone deciding Kosovo's status. But now is the time to help Skopje prepare for it. About the only thing most Albanians and Macedonians share enthusiasm for is NATO and EU membership. Since the last round of NATO enlargement in 2002, Croatia, Macedonia, and Albania have been relegated to a symbolic waiting room known as "the Adriatic Charter." Macedonia, in particular, would benefit enormously from accelerated consideration for entry. At the same time, Washington and Brussels must continue to act as guarantors of Albanian rights gained at the peace talks on Lake Ohrid in August 2001 and must also push the government to address the fears of local Macedonian minorities. The police must crack down on well-armed Albanian criminal gangs, and structural reforms should be implemented. And as it moves toward a decision on Kosovo, the United States should unequivocally warn Albanians in Macedonia (and Montenegro) against any moves toward separation or federalism, isolating all those who advocate them.

When dealing with the Balkans, the devil is usually not in the details but in the failure to confront the obvious. Letting serious problems fester, relying on delay as a default option, and believing blindly in long-term prescriptions for pressing problems will only mire the international community in a region that it badly wishes to forget. Ignoring the region's implications for the U.S. relationship with the Islamic world would also be foolhardy. It may not be possible to completely "solve" the Balkans. But with strong U.S. leadership, transatlantic cooperation, and the application of clear principles, the stalemate in the region can be broken—and Washington can move on to other compelling concerns. 🌐