

Europe and the Western Balkans: The Day After Kosovo's Independence

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Executive Summary

We all need to think about the day after Kosovo's independence. The assumption of independence recognition as the final act of Western Balkans post-conflict settlement will not prove realistic. The final status decision will create a new strategic situation on the ground – not necessarily supportive to the purpose of fast track integration of the Western Balkans into the European mainstream. The ramifications of the Kosovo independence issues may cause further problems and complications for the Western Balkans. It could destabilize neighbors, it could bring nationalist Radicals to power in Belgrade, or it may open space for further Russian strategic penetration into the region

In order to devise an EU strategy for the Balkans in the wake of Kosovo's independence, the framework of interests of the major players and the basic problems should be outlined:

The European Union. The resolution of the Kosovo conundrum is responsibility of the entire international community, but the EU is supposed to lead the entire process. For Europe Kosovo's independence is the last institutional status prerequisite, framing the map of the Western Balkans on the threshold of EU membership. Finalizing this map is a *conditio sine qua non* for the accession process to begin.

It is an issue of overwhelming importance for the EU to close ex-Yugoslav Balkan disputes with its local partners in balanced and cooperative manner, in pursuit of common interest and consensus. The EU does not need defeated nations and causes in its own composition – this is a question of EU identity.

In the context of dealing with communal and national destruction of the Western Balkans the EU has two basic options for a background strategy. The first one is the dominant European – Western strategy for preventing violent change of borders and to support multiethnic – multicultural model of living and national development. The second possible strategic option for the EU and its allies is transformation and reshaping of communities and borders in an attempt to work out maximum ethnic homogeneity as tools to nation state stabilization and faster recovery. Such redesigning of the Balkans offers series of pragmatic benefits, in particular provided the nature of Balkan national mentality, deeply historicist and rooted into the ethnic identity of a nation.

The absence for realistic chances and international consensus to proceed with the 'Balkan conference' strategic option for borders redesign, leaves open only the option to stick to the

multiethnic – multicultural strategy for pacifying and integrating the Balkans into the European mainstream. It is a very expensive, very slow and controversial approach to transform the region. Multiculturalism is a communal principle, governing postmodern democratic societies, while on the Western Balkans we deal with war ravaged weak nations, stuck on the road between traditional society and modernity. The chances of success of this strategy lie only within developing a coherent and systemic strategic approach, well-coordinated both technologically and politically. This should be an intermediate strategy for the Western Balkans, bringing the region to the doorstep of full membership into the EU.

Serbia. The loss of Kosovo today – in any pattern of independence imposed on Serbia – will be interpreted by large communities of Serbs as demonstration of impotence of democratic elites to govern the country. It will be considered a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of a democratic country.

Serbia is a country, defeated in a series of wars in the 1990s, with borders, disputed by diverse ex-Yugoslav communities. There are territorial challenges today emerging from within present Serb borders. Claims for autonomy or ‘independence’ are voiced more and more loudly, coming from the Muslim communities of Sandzak, from Vojvodina, from Southern Serbia.

There is a dangerous assumption in the West that Serb radicalism on Kosovo is largely a show up for the public. This assumption fails to comprehend one basic change in the international strategic situation. The new might of Russia, creates a real political and economic alternative to the slow going European integration process in the Western Balkans. If non-democratic radical nationalists come to power after the next elections, they will have a reference group of allied ‘sovereign democracies’ in Moscow, Minsk and Yerevan, rather than partners in Paris and Brussels.

Regional ramifications: In strategic terms, the rise of Albanian nationalism – a landmark of which is the independence of Kosovo – causes anxiety in the Balkans in several dimensions. The first of them is the potential of direct spill over effect on the immediate neighbors. If a country like Macedonia is de-stabilized, consequences might affect the entire region – re-opening the historical ‘Macedonian question’ is against the interests of all former contenders: Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia. Destabilization of Southern Serbia, Montenegro or any other locality, inhabited by Albanians will also plunge the entire region into economic stagnation, conflicting foreign interests’ infiltration and interethnic crises. Second, the precedent of Kosovo independence produces the fear of a ‘domino effect’ - of indirect spill-over crises in other Balkan countries, hosting large minorities (Hungarians in Romania and Serbia, Turks and Slav Muslims in Greece and Bulgaria). Third, demographic expansion and tribal cohesion of Albanian communities represent a real challenge to their neighbors, when combined with hectic institutional environment and mass scale criminal networking as the major source of making community’s living. The perspective of having a national administration (in Kosovo), directly springing out of the organized crime networks and the KLA past does not inject optimism in any Balkan capital city.

USA. The US has limited and selective strategic agenda in the Balkan region. The final act of fixing the Balkan region from the perspective of the American strategy is finalizing the status of Kosovo after more than a decade long US commitment (which has started in Bosnia in 1994). It is also a kind of foreign policy success – small, but useful for a last year of a

troubled presidency, loaded with Iraq, Iran and the so called ‘war on terror’. According to the US, postponing further the independence claim of Kosovo Albanians may lead to rebellion and regressive destabilization of the region, precluding further US engagement and spending. Last, but not least, doing this favor to Kosovars strengthens American positions of not simply respected, but adored ally and patron for all Albanians. This is a valuable asset for Washington in a region of controversial attitudes towards America among all other major nations and ethnic communities.

Russia. There are several consecutive levels of interpretation to understand Russia’s strategy towards Kosovo independence. Russia is a rising power, aiming at an impressive return on the world stage as a ‘Great Power’. Traditional Russian imperial policy plan – to conquer the Straits and restore Byzantine glory under the scepter of the ‘Third Rome’ – has always included patronage over the Slav Orthodox brothers on the Balkans, subjected by the Ottoman Empire. Anytime the division line between Christian Slavs and Muslims on the Balkans deepens, the protective role of Russia reanimates itself as a powerful psychological and political reaction of the Southern Slavs. Deepening the Balkan cleavages supports Russia’s return as a ‘Great Power’, contrary to the EU strategy of healing and unification. Russia combined historical psychology with pragmatic activities for strategic return through large-scale energy projects in the Balkans.

Paradoxically enough, Kosovo is supporting Russian interest both if it becomes independent, and if the final status is postponed (as claimed by Russian officials in public). An independent Kosovo will open the space to support Serbs in their claims for the northern triangle and the other Serb populated enclaves of Kosovo. Russia also benefits from an indirect spill over effects of Kosovo independence. In legal terms, if Kosovo could become independent against the will of sovereign Serbia, same status should be granted to the splinter enclaves of post-Soviet Georgia, to separatist Transdnistria in Moldova, or even to Crimea in case of Ukrainian departure to the West.

The societal maladies of the Balkans as factors of strategic consideration. A destructive process of communal fragmentation and de-modernization is the first important factor to be considered by the EU strategy for the region. The EU grants membership status to modern nations – that is relatively large, sustainable in terms of economic and institutional behavior identity groups, capable to reproduce a civil environment of relationships between citizens and institutions, dependent on formal rules, and not on blood relationship or kinship. The disintegration of ex-Yugoslavia has shaken the identity, the integrity and the limits of most nations in project. Left on its own, this environment could easily produce a second wave of fragmentation, based on what is called a ‘*postmodern tribalism*’ – irresistible temptation for smaller and smaller communities to utilize the crisis of the nation state in favor of their autonomist or separatist agendas.

De-modernization is deepened with disintegration of societal elites. Modern technocrats have been replaced by authoritarian nationalists after 1990, modern middle class was replaced by war thugs and organized crime bosses, efficient administrators gave way to corrupt clan chiefs. Without reintegration of modern reformist elites, gaining critical mass against the forces of destruction, no process of adaptation – even moderate and formal – to the European mainstream could take place.

Getting Solutions on the Balkans: A Set of Recommendations

I. The day after independent Kosovo.

1. Kosovo will be granted “conditional” or “supervised” independence. The EU should use this conditionality as a tool of enforcing satisfactory level of reform and stabilization of all aspects of life in the ex-province. Conditionality should be strictly observed and applied in particular in all fields of ethnic communal and individual human rights by Kosovo authorities and Kosovo citizens. Tolerating a wave of ethnic cleansing or destruction of cultural-religious heritage on behalf of international institutions will fully jeopardize the moral legitimacy of Kosovo independence recognition.
2. Conditionality of Kosovo independence should be ‘reversible’. Supervisory practices should be re-imposed and re-enforced after once being lifted in case standards of institutional behavior are not observed by Pristina. The timing of this reversibility must be extended to the day of full membership of Kosovo into the EU. There were options discussed of Kosovo gaining independence in stages until full accession. The EU could apply such an approach in a flexible extension or reduction of independence status depending on the performance of Pristina in the reform agenda. The non-compliance with the conditions should lead to downgrading the level of relations.
3. The EU should be ready to strengthen the performance of KFOR peace-keeping and peace-enforcement, depending on the risk of inter-ethnic clashes after the independence recognition. With the Serbs’ enclaves defending their status as parts of Serbia, clashes between them and Albanian majority paramilitary groups are very likely. KFOR must buffer efficiently between both sides for a shorter or longer period of time, before political decisions of the problems are effected. No precedents like the March riots of 2004 should be allowed to happen.
4. The EU authorities should be ready to prevent not only institutional support from Pristina to Albanian rebel groups outside Kosovo, but also any organized attempt for armed spill over to the neighboring countries from Kosovo soil. Without direct support from Kosovo spill over to neighboring territories is impossible. Local crises with Albanian communities in the neighboring countries are possible, but without military organization and transfer of arms from Kosovo damage control over those crises is easy.
5. To prevent spill over effects of Kosovo independence, the EU should augment the stability of neighboring countries. For Macedonia, the level of complexity of governance should be decreased as the ‘Badinter majority’ principle puts unbearable burden on the fragile Macedonian decision making system. The crisis of 2001 was followed by the Ohrid agreement, presuming a complicated political system of *consensual democracy*, practiced so far in limited communities of postmodern nature. A flexible federal system (excluding the presumption of separation), rather than consensual democracy would better serve political realities in Macedonia.
6. Kosovo independence will serve as an organizational boost of organized crime networks of Albanians in the region. There will be no stabilization of the Balkan region, nor any decent government in Pristina, unless direct relationship between political institutions, clan chieftains and trafficking networks is weakened and organized crime is reduced. The EU should impose an authority of strict institutional control over the domestic security apparatus in Kosovo, plus longer term monitoring of customs.
7. The EU should undertake specific efforts to reduce the scope and impact of negative reactions to Kosovo independence in the region and throughout the international community. Brussels should make it clear to Moscow that the cooperation of Russia to resolve the West Balkan bias – Kosovo in particular – is a direct prerequisite for promoting the entire package of EU-Russia partnership. All Russian efforts to destabilize the region, based on alternative vision for Kosovo will be treated as a key obstacle to EU – Russia relations.

8. The EU should work hard to prevent antidemocratic – nationalist backlash in Serbia. While Belgrade claims for keeping Kosovo within Serbia's borders cannot be satisfied, the independence of Pristina should be considered the last change of borders within the ex-Yugoslav space. Serbia should receive official guarantees from Brussels and (possibly) from Washington for its territorial integrity and inviolability of borders. Serbs fear a chain reaction, coming out of the Kosovo precedent. With all its authority the international community, the EU in particular should categorically exclude such a risk from the agenda of the region.
9. The EU should be ready with a detailed plan for conflict management and conflict deterrence in case of a *de facto* split of Kosovo into Albanian 'mainland' and Serb enclaves plus the northern triangle. Positive scenarios in the aftermath of Kosovo independence are welcome. Pessimistic scenarios should be carefully considered and strategic measures to face them should be prepared.

II. Intermediate Strategy to Address Societal Maladies of the Balkans

1. The EU should prepare a framework model of economic recovery and economic growth of the Western Balkans. Poverty alleviation, creation of jobs, plans for systemic development of market infrastructure, physical infrastructure and human resources development. The experience of enforcing neo-liberal orthodoxy as an unchallenged model of economic transformation to post-communist Central and Eastern Europe should be reassessed and revised. Developing social welfare safety nets within the economic transformation process should be seriously considered. The alternative is additional depopulation and de-modernization of the entire region.
2. The 'inner circle' of benefits related to EU membership should be granted ASAP at citizens' level – visa facilitation, educational opportunities, access to EU programs close or equal to those of the citizens in the EU member states.
3. Flexible stimuli to the communities of democratic reformist at political, civic and local-communal level should be provided in order to encourage and empower the democratic civilian options for social and political development in Western Balkan societies. If left on their own, those societies will produce alternative forms of societal organization, related to traditional society values, clan structures, organized crime networks. We need to create privileged status to democracy in order to give it a chance.
4. The EU should encourage flexible formats of institutional political systems in the region, concerning: interethnic communal arrangements, transitional constitutional governments on the way of full-fledged democracy, federal and confederal structures of nation building. The EU should sponsor systematically the nation building process within the region and efficient institutions build up. There's no logical or historical opportunity to join the postmodern – post-national realm of the EU before and without stabilizing national communities and national institutions.
5. There should be wide application of Euro-regions principle and practices – in particular among states hosting larger groups of one and the same ethnicity. Euro-regions, if funded and developed properly may prove viable substitute to change of borders in favor of ethnic-national unification.
6. The EU should stick to a flexible system of status promotion of Western Balkan countries on their way to full membership.

