

Kosovo Independence: An Albanian Perspective

Enika ABAZI¹

Summary

Kosovo's independence has revealed shifting strategic landscapes, security concerns and domestic developments in regional and international politics with significant implications for all actors in the region. Russia calculated to restore its lost 'superpower' status and control Serbia's strategic oil industries. Turkey's prompt recognition of independence increased its impact and prevented a stronger Greek-Serb-Russian axis in the region, while strengthening its Western identity. Kosovo's independence will be a test case for keeping peace and stability in the Balkans within the new dynamics of regional and international politics.

Kosovo's status has been one of the most contentious issues to arise in the aftermath of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. For the Milosevic administration in Belgrade, which abolished Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, the province was an integral part of Serbia. Kosovars responded to Milosevic's policy by declaring independence in 1991 following a popular referendum, although their declaration did not receive international recognition. Kosovo declared its independence for the second time in 2008 with a stronger international backing, due to the involvement of a number of regional and international actors. In between these two declarations, Kosovo assumed a central role in the regional politics of the Balkans, a shift with strong implications for international security. The Kosovo case exemplifies the ways in which ethnic communities in a multicultural setting may face problems in an environment of domestic hostility and regional rivalry.

Background

Kosovo's struggle for independence began after Milosevic's abolition of Kosovo's autonomy in 1989. As a response, in July 1990, the Albanian delegates of the Kosovo Assembly declared Kosovo an "independent and equal entity within the framework of the Yugoslav Federation and an equal subject with its counterparts in Yugoslavia." In the September 1991 referendum, 87.01 percent of population voted in favor of an independent and sovereign state of Kosovo. The Serbian government responded with strong opposition, firing tens of thousands of Albanians from their jobs, banning the teaching of the Albanian language, and transferring a heavy police force to Kosovo territory. These harsh

¹ Enika Abazi is Associated Professor of International Relations at University of New York in Tirana, Albania. eabazi@unyt.edu.al

measures left the Kosovo Albanians no choice but to engage in passive resistance, while the territory of Kosovo fell behind even in restoring autonomy. This already tense environment was worsened by the Dayton agreement's avoidance of the Kosovo problem. Taking matters into its own hands, the UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army) was formed and began to attack Serbian targets in Kosovo. The UCK attacks triggered bloody and brutal Serbian military and paramilitary attacks on Kosovo Albanians in 1998 and 1999.

The escalation of violence paved the way for NATO's military intervention in 1999, and Serbian forces were driven out of Kosovo. UN Security Council Resolution 1244 initiated the deployment of an international civil and security presence in Kosovo under United Nations auspices. Since then, the province has been under UNMIK, the United Nations interim administration in Kosovo, which is expected soon to be replaced by the European Union police and justice mission to Kosovo, (EULEX). The EU mission, approved on February 4, 2008, states that a composition of 2,000 personnel will assist the breakaway of Kosovo from Serbia until it reaches full independence.

The Status of International Recognition

On 17 February 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence for the second time, the event marked the latest episode in the dismemberment of former Yugoslavia. Unlike what had happened in 1991, the newly created state of Kosovo was immediately recognized by the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, Turkey and many other states, while Russia aligned with Serbia to oppose independence.

The character of the war fought in the area induced Albanians in Kosovo to declare independence and led most of the Western states to act in favor of Albanians' actions. The international community's generally positive attitude toward Kosovo's independence was initiated in part by the US-led military intervention, US support for Kosovo's independence, and the disappearance of Soviet power from the Balkan geography. Kosovo's successful bid for independence in 2008 once again underlines the fact that Cold War structures have dissolved, and that there is a new geopolitical landscape in the region. Kosovo's independence has already had an impact on relations between regional actors, including the EU, Russia, NATO and Turkey. In Europe, it marked the end of the Cold War structures; it demonstrated the primacy of human and minority rights in international politics; and it redefined aspects of security relations between NATO and the EU, NATO and Russia, and the EU and Turkey.

The policies of Russia and Turkey in particular toward the Kosovo case seem of particular interest in light of these countries' shifting strategic landscapes, security concerns and domestic developments after the end of the Cold War era. Another issue making relations between these countries of specific concern now is the tendency to draw parallels between the Kosovo case and those involving Chechnya, Cyprus and the Kurdish problem, even in official accounts. In spite of this trend, it is important to note that the Kosovo case is unique and has its own peculiarities. Specifically, the Kosovo problem is related to the context of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the mismanagement of the conflict in its aftermath. As indicated by the UNHCR, 850,000 people were displaced during the conflict. Moreover, the

systemic and mass killings targeting the Kosovo Albanians ultimately challenged the sovereignty and territorial inviolability of state. The Serbian state prioritized state security in the Kosovo territory and attempted to achieve it by enacting massive violations of human rights and furthering a total dissolution of societal security. This policy line created an environment in which Serbs and Albanians could no longer live together, and led the Kosovo Albanians to begin their search for independence.

Russia and Kosovo

Historically, Russia pursued a policy of domination in the Balkans, and competed severely with the regional powers. Serbs have traditionally supported Russian designs in the Balkans, receiving Russian help in return for their loyal position. This relationship was used by the Russians in their quest to gain supremacy in the region vis-à-vis the regional countries, and was utilized by the Serbs in their efforts to follow an independent stance in foreign policy and domestic affairs. This symbiotic pattern continued during the Cold War, and the Tito administration was careful to preserve the relationship at an optimum point, which would guarantee the mutual interests of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. At the end of the twentieth century, and not for the first time, Russia found itself “compelled” to defend the Serbian cause, a choice motivated largely by the imperatives of Russia’s former ‘superpower’ status, and the thinly-veiled goal of controlling Serbia’s strategic oil industries.

In this sense, convinced that a close relationship with Serbia was essential to Russian policy in the Balkans, Moscow and Belgrade developed a special relationship. For the West, this relationship represented the continuation of the division of labor set at Dayton, where Russia dealt with the Serbs and the West with the rest of the regional powers. Stretching to maintain its long-established policies, Moscow tried to combat Western opposition to the Milosevic regime and later to Kosovo’s final status. This attitude was interpreted as a continuation of Russia’s role as a former superpower, and as evidence of Russia’s ethnic bond to its Slav neighbors. For his part, Russian president Vladimir Putin denounced the recognition of independence by the US and many other Western states as a dangerous move. He considered the declaration of statehood by the Kosovo Assembly as “illegal, ill-conceived and immoral,” pointing out that in light of such precedent, Moscow would be forced to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia.

Russian foreign policy has become much more assertive and nationalistic in recent years, and the Kosovo problem has contributed to this radicalization. Russia is currently using Kosovo for its tactical advantage, as part of a strategy to reassert itself on the international stage. This change seems to be affected, in turn, by the growing power of the “nationalist-revisionist” forces in Russian politics, who call for revisions in the post-Cold War. They oppose U.S. unilateralism and consider it to be unjust to Russia, which has unfairly lost its former superpower role and sphere of influence.

Turkey’s New Position

As the successor of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey perceives Kosovo, in former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit’s words, “as a debt it owes to its own history” and the Balkans as an inseparable part of its history and culture. The reason for this is the five centuries long

coexistence of Balkan elements under the roof of the Ottoman Empire. Most of the Ottoman Albanians converted to Islam and, as such, had a quick integration into the imperial structures, becoming part of Ottoman society without discrimination. At the present, there are millions of Turks who have Albanian ancestry and relatives in the Balkans. In addition, there is a strong Turkish minority living in the Balkans and in Kosovo in particular. These Turks, to whose fate Turkey is sensitive, had been left behind since the times of the Empire. For political and social reasons, then, Turkey would like to strengthen its impact on the domestic affairs of the region.

In the Balkans, Turkey's Post Cold War foreign policy kept an 'observer status' rather than taking on a role of assertive leadership. Although in the early '90s under Turgut Özal, Turkey had started a "Balkan offensive," reviving its Ottoman heritage in the ex-territories of the Empire, these policies were discontinued because of the war in Bosnia and Kosovo. Turkey's present recognition of the independence of Kosovo reflects a change in its foreign policy. Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans suffers the consequences of a twisted legacy, namely the impact of the past and the prerogatives of the present. The Ottoman past ties Turkey to the Balkans, while the challenges of the future limit it to the role of a follower unable to embark on independent actions.

Still, Turkey's policy toward Kosovo has moved from concession and passive stances to favoring the preservation of the status quo, a more dynamic position that includes active support for NATO military operations in Kosovo and prompt recognition of its independence. Defending the incontestable principles of the UN charter and the OSCE documents, Turkey has been firm about the preservation of the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and has sympathized with the calls to refrain from the use of force and interference in its internal affairs. Obviously Turkey has been sketching parallels between the Kosovo case and the Kurdish question in South-eastern Turkey, fearing a negative impact on its own problem.

Turkey has other concerns in regard to the Kosovo problem. As former Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit underlined, the "Serbian-Orthodox union, and the foreign policy based on the Serb-Orthodox axis" was considered to represent a problematic alliance that "might be far more dangerous than that of ideological polarization" for Turkey. Indeed, this alliance may yet attract Greece, leading to a stronger Greek-Serb-Russian axis in this geo-strategically important region. It is in Turkey's best interests to avoid a strong Pan-orthodox alliance in the Balkans which has the potential to negatively influence Turkey's EU membership process and place Russia back in an advantageous position in the Balkans vis-à-vis other regional actors. Acknowledging this line of thought, Turkey's former policy was to ensure autonomy for the ethnic Turkish minority in Kosovo within the borders of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, the evolution of the Kosovo problem has forced Turkey to change its position. The new policy line is the recognition of the independence of Kosovo.

This new policy has triple benefits for Turkey. First, the status quo and the existing balance of power in the region has changed, and Turkey did respond accordingly. Second, Turkey can now strengthen its influence in the region, taking advantage of the end of the Cold War

and the new foreign policy momentum based on a re-interpretation of Turkey's Kamalist legacy as it searches for integration into the EU. Turkey did not have any influence in the Rambouillet negotiations or the Paris talks; Russia or Finland mediated between Belgrade and Pristina while Turkey sat on the sidelines. Turkey's apparent exclusion from the ongoing diplomatic efforts, raised not only the question of Turkey's role in Kosovo, but also Turkey's frustration about its place and role in European and regional security matters, in particular after the recent developments in the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI). Turkey's frustration over these issues and their troubling implications for its identity and influence in the region may help explain its positive attitude towards independence. Third, in light of its continued Western vocation, Turkey felt obliged to share the West's aspirations, and thus participated actively in the American-led war and recognition of Kosovo's independence. This strategic choice is not only a means of strengthening its Western identity but also a positive component of its security policy and culture.

The Future

Kosovo's independence, while contested in diplomatic practice, opens a perspective for the Balkan countries to begin integration into regional and European schemes. Integration remains the only solution capable of putting an end to the region's rivalries and historical hostilities. Integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions is an attractive, albeit difficult, process. Attractive, first, because the integration process increases team spirit while enhancing the role and the status of the states in international relations. Difficult, because sharing common values is a learning process. The integration process encourages solidarity in such a way that diversity is projected as an enrichment of the commonly-built value system. Moreover, integration provides positive results that are reflected in different countries' economic and social indicators and also the marginalization of those who remain "outside" of this integration.

The Balkan countries' desire to join into the European Union and NATO should be considered a positive development for the region. The search for integration into these Western institutions is likely to involve long processes in which each country faces different challenges. Yet with the resignation of Kostunica, even Serbia seems to be moving in the same pro-integration direction. Contrary to Kostunica's hard-line position, Mr. Tadic and his party prioritize Serbia's integration into the EU over whatever happens with Kosovo. The signature of a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU would open the way for quick integration, allowing Serbia to catch up with its neighbors – provided it gives tacit approval to Kosovo's independence. Kosovo will continue to occupy a central role in regional geopolitics, a status with implications for international security. The involvement of the US, NATO, the EU and Russia makes the Kosovo issue a matter of international security, while Turkish, Greek and Russian concerns over regional terms serve to create a regional rivalry. The way to escape from regional and international rivalries in Kosovo and its environs is to enhance the forces of cooperation in this volatile region and avoid zero-sum games among regional and international actors. There remains hope for a peaceful environment in the region, so long as all sides act in a responsible way.