



September–October 2005

## The Future of Kosovo

By Vance Serchuk

*Kosovo returns to the headlines this fall with the widely expected launch of “future status talks,” intended to determine whether this former province of Serbia—administered as a UN trusteeship since the NATO-led war in 1999—becomes an independent state. It is hoped that the negotiations will bring an end to the uncertainty that has clouded Kosovo’s fate for the past six years and poisoned its politics, empowering Serb and Albanian extremists alike to agitate for maximal demands. Unfortunately, however, by treating the talks as a “process” open to a range of outcomes and failing to match rhetoric with action on the ground, the international community is creating a dynamic that threatens to exacerbate the ambiguity about Kosovo’s political future rather than resolve it.*

There are many things Kosovo lacks—functional political institutions, freedom of movement, a viable economy—but spray paint is not one of them, at least if the profusion of political graffiti in downtown Pristina is any indication. The concrete walls of this former Serbian province provide a veritable voting guide to the factions vying for power, as well as a crash course in their initials. Of particular note is the agitprop of Vetevendosja, an Albanian grassroots movement calling for the immediate independence of Kosovo. To the irritation of international authorities, its motto, “No Negotiations/Self-Determination,” has become all but ubiquitous around the city, unmistakable in its black and red block lettering.

Vandalism typically does not leave much room for nuance, which is probably a big reason it is so popular in postwar Kosovo. The uncertainty hanging over the region’s fate has permeated—and infuriated—its politics over the past six years, providing fertile ground for movements like Vetevendosja that rally support by rejecting compromise.

This is also the problem that the Kosovo Contact Group—the informal body comprising

the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia—hopes to solve this fall, with the launch of “future status talks” to determine whether, and when, Kosovo becomes an independent state. “We think it’s very much time to define the future of Kosovo,” said R. Nicholas Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs and principal architect of the Bush administration’s Balkans strategy, during a visit to Pristina in June.<sup>1</sup> The final hurdle before the talks can commence is an independent assessment currently being conducted by Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide, whose report is expected in October.

Yet despite appearances, the drive toward status talks has yet to puncture the underlying uncertainty about Kosovo’s political future. To the contrary, because the Contact Group is—at least in public—treating the negotiations as a process open to a range of outcomes, the destabilizing ambiguity is actually being exacerbated. And while the Bush administration has arguably pushed as hard as any other international actor to answer the existential questions about Kosovo’s future, its Balkans policy—like the Clinton administration’s before it—remains dangerously tentative.

---

Vance Serchuk (vserchuk@aei.org) is a research fellow at AEI.

## Uncertainty and Its Discontents

Kosovo, it might be said, has been the alpha and the omega of the Balkan wars. It was here, during a visit in April 1987, that a Communist apparatchik named Slobodan Milosevic first began to grasp the possibilities that Serb nationalism presented as a power base. “No one should dare to beat you!” he proclaimed infamously to a crowd of rioting Serbs, as local Albanian police struggled to restrain them.<sup>2</sup> Outnumbered ten to one by Albanians in the province, Kosovo’s Serbs hailed Milosevic as their defender, while he, in turn, proved only too happy to exploit their sense of persecution and victimization to consolidate control in Belgrade.

In the decade ahead, Milosevic’s regime would escalate its program of discrimination and harassment against Kosovar Albanians. In March 1989, the Serbian National Assembly revoked the self-government granted to Kosovo by Marshall Tito’s 1974 Yugoslav constitution. Kosovar Albanians were fired from their state jobs, while the Albanian language and media were methodically repressed and the Serbian police presence expanded. As Robert D. Kaplan observed, Milosevic was “the only European Communist leader who managed to save himself and his party from collapse [and] did so by making a direct appeal to racial hatred.”<sup>3</sup>

As the heartland of the medieval Serbian empire and the cradle of Serbian Orthodoxy’s most important monasteries and churches, Kosovo was—and remains—a natural rallying point for Serb nationalism. The historical patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church is itself located just outside the city of Pec, in western Kosovo, and Serbs to this day insist on calling the territory “Kosovo and Metohija”—the latter word roughly translatable as “church land,” for the vast tracts once held by the Serbian Orthodox Church there.<sup>4</sup>

Kosovo, of course, is also where Milosevic’s ambitions for greater Serbia ultimately unraveled. By the late 1990s, Serb depredations against the Kosovar Albanians had provoked the rise of a guerrilla force, the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA). As Serbian officials were targeted in desultory attacks by the KLA, Milosevic’s regime struck back against the Albanian civilian population. In January 1999, for instance, Serb paramilitary and police forces executed forty-five Albanian civilians, including a twelve-year-old boy and three women.<sup>5</sup> Following a failed attempt the next month at Chateau Rambouillet to impose a diplomatic settlement on Milosevic and the Albanians, NATO launched an air

war against Serbia in March 1999 to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

The seventy-eight-day NATO campaign—although fraught with problems and frustrations, many self-inflicted—succeeded in driving Serb forces out of Kosovo. Rather than attempt to resolve the status of Kosovo at this point, however, the Contact Group instead chose to duck the question by placing the territory under the open-ended, “interim” administration of the United Nations. With the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 on June 10, 1999, the international community pledged itself to the paradoxical goals of promoting “substantial autonomy and self-government in Kosovo” while simultaneously “taking full account of the . . . principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and other countries of the region.”<sup>6</sup> In effect, the Contact Group and the UN were attempting—for reasons of diplomatic and geopolitical expediency—to sweep under the rug the very thorny, existential dilemma about Kosovo’s self-determination that was the source of the Serb-Albanian conflict in the first place, wanly hoping it would simply fade away over time. It did not.

As with the failed Rambouillet Accords, resolution 1244 proposed a status quo that left neither Serbs nor Albanians happy, but, by virtue of being vaguely “transitional,” did not force either side to internalize any meaningful compromise, either. There was, after all, no final settlement to accept or reject, just the postponement of one. Consequently, political elites were free to fantasize about any number of hypothetical, future scenarios in which all of their demands would be met.

This was especially true among the Kosovar Albanians, whose leaders were quick to assert that the post-1999 political order was just a temporary way station on the road to full independence. As the status quo persisted, however, the lack of progress toward statehood—and indeed, the lack of clarity about the international community’s intentions—soon became the prism through which all of the Albanians’ economic and political frustrations were refracted.

It did not help that the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) interpreted its mandate in ways that explicitly handicapped its ability to govern effectively, exacerbating the sense of local grievance. Until quite recently, for instance, UNMIK refused to pursue a comprehensive privatization of Kosovo’s moldering industry, on the basis that it lacked the legal basis to do so. Trusteeship thus became synonymous with a stagnant, basket-case

economy in the minds of the Albanian public, who were encouraged in this belief by an indigenous leadership all too happy to pass blame for the province's myriad problems to the international community.

It was only a question of time before this rising discontent spilled into the streets—which is precisely what happened in March 2004, with an explosion of anti-Serb and anti-UN rioting that rocked the province. In what the UN subsequently deemed “an organized, widespread, and targeted campaign,” Albanian crowds drove at least 4,500 Serbs and other ethnic minorities from their homes, ransacking UN offices and property as well.<sup>7</sup> More than thirty Serbian churches, monasteries, and other religious or cultural sites were pillaged, including sites dating to the fourteenth century. “A monastery is seen as the embassy of Belgrade in Kosovo,” offers one UN administrator by way of explanation, shaking his head.<sup>8</sup>

Even worse than the violence itself, however, was the weak-kneed, feckless response of NATO and UNMIK security forces, which spluttered in the face of the uprisings. At the Holy Archangels monastery, tucked into a rocky gorge outside the town of Prizren, for example, German peacekeepers claimed they were under orders to protect people, not property. As a wave of Albanian rioters advanced, they bundled Serbian Orthodox monks into their armored personnel carriers and fled, leaving the patrimonial site to be destroyed.

It was out of the ashes of the March 2004 conflagration that the effort to settle Kosovo's fate emerged. As UNMIK's own internal postmortem on the riots acknowledged, “The dominant factor that produced the upheaval of violence on 17–18 March was mounting frustration and apprehension caused by Kosovo's uncertain future status. This existential issue had remained stalemated for nearly five years, since the beginning of the mission.”<sup>9</sup>

It must be acknowledged, then, that the impending future status talks are not the product of any meaningful, on-the-ground movement by Serbs and Albanians toward reconciliation, but rather, are an outgrowth of the international community's own sense of frustration and exhaustion over an unsustainable status quo.

They also, unfortunately, establish the precedent that violence gets results. After all, what the Kosovar Albanian leadership failed to accomplish over five years through the internationally sanctioned levers of power was instead achieved through the rioting of a faceless

mob. To this day, international authorities in Kosovo insist they are uncertain who precisely was behind the events of March 2004; regardless, the lesson—about the utility of violence—has been lost on no one.

## Sticking Our Head in the Sand

The Contact Group and UNMIK find themselves today in an unenviable position, preparing to broker a deal over Kosovo at a time when there appears to be scant political will among indigenous actors to accept painful compromises and even less enthusiasm on the part of the international community to implement or enforce them. The result, as noted in a recent—and typically incisive—report by the International Crisis Group, is that “the international community is stuck between the low energy and realist cynicism of its approach on the ground and the principles of human rights, multi-ethnicity, and reversal of ethnic cleansing to which it theoretically ascribes.”<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere is this tension more keenly felt than in the refusal of the Contact Group to do publicly what it already acknowledges privately—that is, endorse limited, conditional independence for Kosovo as its preferred outcome for the status talks. Behind closed doors, virtually every diplomat in Kosovo agrees that this is the only workable endpoint for the talks. Kosovar Albanians will never accept any return to Serbian rule (real or symbolic), and the international actors engaged in the Balkans do not have the energy or the interest in forcing them to do so; at the same time, Pristina is unprepared for full statehood, which could also imperil the political progress made by Serbia since the ouster of Milosevic in 2001. Some form of limited or conditional independence would also allow Western powers to continue to exert influence on key nodal points in the emerging Kosovar state—in particular, the security sector.

By making explicit the rough contours of a compromise settlement from the outset, the international community would no doubt dissatisfy many in Serbia and Kosovo alike, but it would also force leaders on both sides to start focusing on the pragmatic details of a deal, bypassing the zero-sum, existential argument about Kosovo for which they are otherwise preparing themselves.

This is not, however, the approach the Contact Group has taken to date. Instead, it has maintained the pretense, as Under Secretary Burns argued this summer in Pristina, that, “We don't think it's possible to impose

a peace or impose our ideas. . . . We've very specifically said that we support a process that will lead to peace and security. But we're not going to give public advice; we're not going to take sides; we're not going to say we're for this or that."<sup>11</sup> Tellingly, the State Department also began referring this summer to the coming negotiations as "future" status talks, rather than "final" status talks.

Albanians and Serbs, unsurprisingly, have been quick to seize this professed uncertainty over Kosovo's future, interpreting it in ways that will make reaching an agreement significantly harder. Rather than preparing their respective populations for compromise, public expectations on both sides are being carefully primed in opposite directions, toward more maximal positions.

For the Albanians, this is manifest in a deepening conviction that nothing less than full independence is now acceptable. "Why should Kosovo limit its sovereignty?" demanded Prime Minister Bajram Kosumi during a private audience in July. "If Kosovo does not become a completely independent state, there will be consequences."<sup>12</sup> Alex Anderson, director of the Kosovo office of the International Crisis Group, also notes a hardening of opinion. "It used to be 'conditional independence,'" he says. "Now you often hear, 'Oh, that's not good enough any more.'"<sup>13</sup>

Among the Serbs, on the other hand, uncertainty about final status is helping to keep alive the hope that Kosovo's full independence might still be averted. To bolster its case, Belgrade points to the lack of progress in persuading Serb refugees to return to Kosovo, as well as the miserable state of those who have remained. Most live in an archipelago of impoverished, embittered enclaves, bounded by barbed wire, burnt houses, and NATO peacekeepers.

Serbian president Boris Tadic, to his credit, has proposed that Kosovo might receive "more than autonomy, less than independence."<sup>14</sup> But beyond this highly controversial, vaguely-defined attempt at a compromise gesture, Serbian liberals warn that any further concession toward Kosovo on their part would only risk provoking a nationalist backlash and the elevation of radicals to power in Belgrade. That dire calculus may be at least partly correct. But if so, it is all the more reason why the bounds of a final settlement should be imposed by

the international community at the outset of talks, rather than left open in the hope that it will spring up organically from the ground.

The Contact Group's refusal to take a stronger hand in clarifying the parameters for status is especially hard to fathom, since it has already imposed some conditions on the coming talks. In testimony to the House International Relations Committee in May, for example, Under Secretary Burns identified "basic principles that should guide a settlement of Kosovo's status," including a ban on changing "the boundaries of the current territory of Kosovo, either through partition or through a new union of Kosovo with any country or part of any country."<sup>15</sup>

A diktat against the partition or union of Kosovo may be entirely sensible, but it simply cannot be squared with the Contact Group's pretensions of neutrality. Worse yet, it may prove unenforceable. In ruling out partition in particular, the international community has laid down a red line that it has demonstrated scant willingness or ability to defend—thus raising doubts about its credibility in shaping the talks.

Kosovo, after all, has already been partitioned, as anyone who has visited the gritty, industrial city of Mitrovica can see. Serbia effectively controls the four municipalities in the northwestern corner of Kosovo, north of the Ibar River, which bisects Mitrovica. In the northern half of the city, parallel Serb police and government structures operate openly, and the currency of choice is the Serb dinar, not the euro, as in the rest of Kosovo. Traveling on a public bus from Mitrovica to Belgrade, one encounters no border or passport controls.

Rooting out or normalizing the Serb structures in northwestern Kosovo—not to mention reasserting the border with Serbia—would require international and Kosovar Albanian leaders to expend significant energy and resources, which thus far they have shown little proclivity to do. In theory, the Serb north could be granted substantial autonomy within an independent Kosovo under the same "de-centralization" scheme that is being currently tested with Serb enclaves in the south—at minimum, providing a legal patina for what these municipalities already enjoy. In practice, however, the Contact Group and UNMIK have taken a

---

Albanians and Serbs, unsurprisingly, have been quick to seize this professed uncertainty over Kosovo's future, interpreting it in ways that will make reaching an agreement significantly harder.

---

largely hands-off approach to the Serb-controlled northwest, allowing facts on the ground to develop at their own pace.

For its part, Serbia is clearly laying the groundwork for the formal annexation of this swath of territory, building separate telephone, water, and road infrastructure that will allow it to bypass Albanian Kosovo entirely. In addition to offering Belgrade a useful chip in the coming status talks, certain senior Serbian officials have also hinted that they might accede to Kosovo's independence as part of a broader package agreement with Pristina that legitimizes their hold on northwestern Kosovo. "They'll be content to hold at the Ibar River," predicts one experienced Balkans analyst. "The prize for them are the four northern municipalities. The U.S. is dead set against partition, but partition has already happened. . . . The international community has been keeping its head in the sand on Mitrovica for some time."<sup>16</sup>

This might, in fact, not be such a bad deal at the end of the day, although it would raise several objections. First, a partition of Kosovo would create an uneasy precedent for redrawing borders on the basis of ethnicity elsewhere in the Balkans, such as Serb-majority parts of Bosnia, which could in turn reignite the debates of the 1990s. However, this problem might be neutralized if an agreement on the northwestern municipalities was reached as part of a broader Kosovo settlement with the leadership in Belgrade, which in any case no longer entertains the territorial ambitions it once did.

Second, and perhaps more trenchantly, partition would mean abandoning hope of a multiethnic Kosovo—the preservation of which was, after all, the justification for the original intervention. Although approximately two-thirds of Serbs in Kosovo live in the enclaves to the south, the return of the northern municipalities to Belgrade would likely prompt many of these holdouts to leave their homes and return to Serbia. Then again, many Serbs already claim that they will leave Kosovo if independence is declared, regardless of the fine print on the deal.

Indeed, it may be time to face the sad reality that multiethnicity is simply not a realistic objective in the near term for Kosovo. The task at hand, rather, is the peaceful disengagement of two populations, both of which have been systematically conditioned not to accept life under the rule of the other. As one UN regional administrator says bluntly of the Albanians, "Even the most tolerant people don't want to be seen with Serbs."<sup>17</sup>

## Welcome to Trashcanistan

Although contemplating the future of Kosovo easily calls forth worst-case scenarios, it is considerably harder to imagine realistic positive alternatives. "If they are not given independence, it will make problems," warns one UN official. "And if they are given independence, it will make problems."<sup>18</sup>

In Kosovo, as in so many places from Iraqi Kurdistan to the Palestinian territories, political elites—with the silent assent of the international community—have encouraged the public to conflate the narrow question of self-determination with a much broader set of political, economic, and social aspirations. Albanian Kosovars too often regard independence as the magic wand that will instantly offer redress to all their woes, rather than as an opening to start the slow, painful reforms that are desperately needed.

In some instances, in fact, independence may actually hurt. Take Kosovo's "economy," which today subsists almost entirely on foreign aid, remittances from the half-million-strong Albanian diaspora in Western Europe, and a sprawling illicit sector. In the short term, at least, independence could very well reduce the first two of these sources of income, as donor fatigue deepens and refugees return home. Albanians leaders argue that they will be able to more than offset any losses through greater access to international financial institutions, which is currently severely limited, and a flood of foreign investment. But given Kosovo's reputation for criminality and corruption, there is good reason to doubt this assessment.

Indeed, the biggest problem in Kosovo—regardless of its political status—remains governance. Although diplomats speak valiantly about the territory's "European destiny," Kosovo at least in the near future is more likely to resemble Moldova than the Czech Republic.

Despite UNMIK's efforts to create recognizably liberal political institutions in Kosovo—government ministries, a parliament, and so on—power in the region remains resolutely vested in illiberal, informal patronage networks that subsist on a pseudo-criminal shadow economy. Political parties have their own intelligence networks (or is it vice versa?), and organs of municipal government are treated as sweet shops.

The same, not incidentally, is true to a large extent in Serbia proper—and certainly in the northwestern municipalities of Kosovo it controls. Where, for instance, do the local power brokers in north Mitrovica derive much of their power? From control of a hospital,

of course! As one of the few large employers in the region, the regional hospital provides infinite opportunities for patronage, from “security guards” drawn from the ranks of local thugs to various other positions, kept on short-term contracts to ensure the loyalty of whom-ever is chosen to fill them.<sup>19</sup> It is no coincidence, after all, that the best examples of interethnic cooperation in the western Balkans can be found in the flourishing ties between Serb and Albanian criminal underworlds.

With reduced international oversight and the formal dissolution of UNMIK, which—for all its dysfunction—was not run as a for-profit enterprise, an independent Kosovo is likely to become a quintessential “Trashcanistan,” a term coined by Princeton historian Stephen Kotkin to describe the “parasitic states and statelets, government-led extortion rackets and gangs in power . . . and shadow economies” that have sprung up across Eastern Europe and Central Asia since the Soviet collapse, invariably in the name of national self-determination. “Although each case for a nation-state may appear just,” Kotkin argues, “‘national’ self-determination is too often a recipe for Trashcanistan—for systemic malfeasance and economic involution, with convenient cover for the worst political scoundrels and their legions of apologists.”<sup>20</sup>

So who, then, benefits from an independent Kosovo? To be honest, very few—certainly not the majority of people consigned to live in such an entity. But that does not stop them from clamoring for it—a dirty little truth to which U.S. policymakers long ago grew resigned.

In the long term, of course, Americans and Europeans alike hope that the prospect of integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions can help transform the internal politics in the western Balkans (the European Union’s own identity crisis notwithstanding). Imposing a compromise settlement over Kosovo holds the possibility of creating the space necessary for this process to begin—and making that deal happen is, pragmatically speaking, more than enough of a challenge for now. But policymakers should not delude themselves to think that a settlement on Kosovo in the coming months will address the deeper, systemic problems in the region. Like it or not, the United States and its European allies will be stuck in the Balkan miasma for a long time to come.

## Notes

1. U.S. Fed News, “Under Secretary for Political Affairs Addresses Press Conference in Pristina,” June 8, 2005.
2. David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 83.
3. Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 40.
4. Kosovar Albanians, for their part, call their territory “Kosova.” For the sake of neutrality and consistency, this paper will simply use the internationally accepted name, “Kosovo.”
5. Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 446.
6. UN Security Council, 4011 meeting, “UN Security Council Resolution 1244,” June 10, 1999, available at <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/docu/u990610a.htm>.
7. UN Security Council, “March Violence in Kosovo ‘Huge Setback’ to Stabilization, Reconciliation, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Tells Security Council,” news release, April 13, 2004.
8. Interview with a UN administrator, July 2005.
9. UN Mission in Kosovo, “Report of the Crisis Management Review Body,” (Kosovo, June 1, 2004): 7.
10. International Crisis Group, “Bridging Kosovo’s Mitrovica Divide,” *Europe Report* no. 165 (September 13, 2005): 7.
11. U.S. Fed News, “Under Secretary for Political Affairs Addresses Press Conference in Pristina.”
12. Bajram Kosumi (prime minister), in discussion with the author, July 2005.
13. Alex Anderson, in discussion with the author, July 2005.
14. Omer Karabeg, “Kosovo: Independence or the Broadest Autonomy?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Reports (May 5, 2005), available at <http://www.rferl.org/reports/southslavic/2005/05/12-050505.asp>.
15. R. Nicholas Burns, “Status of Kosovo,” testimony to the House International Relations Committee, May 18, 2005.
16. Interview with an analyst on the Balkans, July 2005.
17. Interview with a UN regional administrator, July 2005.
18. Interview with a UN official, July 2005.
19. See International Crisis Group, “Bridging Kosovo’s Mitrovica Divide,” *Europe Report* no. 165 (September 13, 2005): 16.
20. Stephen Kotkin, “Trashcanistan: A Tour through the Wreckage of the Soviet Empire,” *The New Republic*, April 15, 2002.