

Kosovo's declaration of independence destabilises Europe

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Yesterday's declaration of independence from Serbia by Kosovo's parliament brings the world a step closer to another war on European soil. The move has been prepared and encouraged by the United States and the European powers in a deliberate attempt to stoke hostilities with Russia.

Kosovan Prime Minister Hacim Thaci declared "The independence of Kosovo marks the end of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia," while Serbia's Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica called Kosovo a "false state". The unilateral move by Kosovo is expected to win the support of the US and the EU today, in the face of strenuous objections from both Serbia and Russia that this action is a flagrant breach of international law.

Kosovo has long been the focus of bitter conflict between the Serbian government and separatist forces from the territory's majority ethnic Albanians, most notably the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). These conflicts were utilised by the Western powers to facilitate the break up of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and thereby secure their domination of a region considered strategic in securing control of oil, gas and mineral deposits in territories previously dominated by the Soviet Union.

The KLA was secretly armed and trained by the US and Germany, while Washington officially designated it as a terrorist organisation funded by heroin trafficking. In 1996, it began targeting Serb police units in Kosovo, sparking a military conflict with the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic that, by 1998, saw the province divided along ethnic lines. The KLA took control of between 25 to 40 percent of Kosovo in mid-1998 before Serb forces wrested the KLA-held area back. The imminent defeat of the KLA prompted direct intervention by NATO in 1999, justified in the name of opposing ethnic cleansing and atrocities by Serbian forces.

The war ended on June 10 after a 78-day aerial bombardment of Serbian forces and Serbia itself. Its end saw a military standoff between British and Russian forces at Pristina airport.

Kosovo was placed under the control of the United Nations, but on terms that reflected the tense power struggle for regional hegemony between the US and EU on one side, and Russia on the other. Kosovo has a population of just two million, of whom the majority are ethnic Albanian. But there remained a minority of Serbs, which even today, after campaigns of ethnic cleansing, numbers around 120,000.

Resolution 1244 of June 10, 1999 ordered the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces and the handing over of Kosovo to the control of the UN Security Council—of which Russia is a permanent member—and its military mission, KFOR. It made no mention of independence and was based on the general principle of "facilitating a political process designed to determine Kosovo's future status" and a "political

solution to the Kosovo crisis". Its preamble referred specifically to the "territorial integrity" of Yugoslavia, and Article 10 authorises only "substantial autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" and deployment "under United Nations auspices".

However, since the West engineered the downfall of Milosevic in September 2000 and the subsequent inauguration of Bush as president, the US has been pushing for Kosovo's independence. Bush visited Albania last June and has challenged Russia to try and block independence on the Security Council.

This is only one example of the worsening relations between Moscow and Washington. Hostilities have emerged over control of the Middle East's and Central Asia's energy supplies, as well as Washington's threat to set up rocket silos in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic as part of its so-called "missile shield".

The US won the support of Europe's major states—most notably Germany, France and the UK—so as to use the European Union as an instrument for bypassing the Security Council and facilitating a final push for a limited form of independence for Kosovo on terms drawn up for the UN by former Finnish president, Martti Ahtisaari. The limitations supposedly include international supervision, a limit to its armed forces and commitments to protect the Serbs and other minorities. Kosovo is not allowed to join another country, meaning Albania.

The EU has already approved the dispatch of a 2,000-strong police and justice mission to Kosovo to take over a watchdog role from the United Nations in June. Deployment is to be staggered, but by June 1,500 police officers including special anti-riot units, 250 judges, prosecutors and customs officials will be in place. They will come from Germany and Italy, as well as the US. NATO troops will continue to be stationed there.

The EU mission statement declares baldly that independence for Kosovo is within the spirit of Resolution 1244 and that "once an entity has emerged as a state in the sense of international law, a political decision can be taken to recognise it."

The move has been denounced by Moscow and the pro-Western Serbian government of President Boris Tadic, who was only installed last week and is opposed by more nationalist parties. Both insist that Serbia is a sovereign state that has not agreed to independence for Kosovo. There is no Security Council resolution authorising the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, and both insist it is therefore illegal.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared February 12: "We are speaking here about the subversion of all the foundations of international law, about the subversion of those principles which, at huge effort, and at the cost of Europe's pain, sacrifice and

bloodletting have been earned and laid down as a basis of its existence.

“We are speaking about a subversion of those principles on which the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe rests, those [principles] laid down in the fundamental documents of the UN.”

The Russian foreign ministry warned on Friday it would have to “take into account” any declaration of independence by Kosovo in regard to its relations with Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Kosovo’s independence “presupposes a revision of commonly accepted norms and principles of international law” that govern separatist movements from Moldova to Indonesia, it added.

This followed the statements made by President Vladimir Putin at his final annual press conference in the Kremlin before stepping down that any declaration of statehood would be “illegal, ill-conceived and immoral”.

Putin argued that Kosovo was in the same category as separatist conflicts in parts of the former Soviet Union, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Trans-Dniester and warned that Russia would be forced to act. “Other countries look after their interests. We consider it appropriate to look after our interests. We have done some homework and we know what we will do,” he threatened.

Fears have been raised that Russia will now back separatist demands, destabilising the US allies, Georgia and Ukraine. But there are broader fears that developments in Kosovo will unleash separatist demands throughout Europe.

Serbia’s foreign minister, Vuk Jeremic, warned of a precedent that would lead to “an uncontrolled cascade of secession”.

“Should Serbia be partitioned against its will ... it could in turn result in the escalation of many existing conflicts, the reactivation of a number of frozen conflicts, and the instigation of who knows how many new conflicts,” he warned.

Serbia has threatened to blockade Kosovo and cut its power and telephone systems. But Moscow’s responses are far more important and threaten a direct conflict with the US.

Speaking alongside Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko in Moscow last week, Putin said Russia may target its missiles at Ukraine if it joins NATO and accepts the deployment of the US missile defence shield. “It is terrifying even to think that in response, Russia could target its nuclear missile systems against Ukraine. This is what worries us,” Putin said.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denounced Russia for “intimidating its neighbours”, stating that the “reprehensible rhetoric that is coming out of Moscow is unacceptable” and declaring that Washington was “devoted to the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine and of other states that were once a part of the Soviet Union.”

It is against this background that the move towards Kosovar independence must be judged. In reality what is being created is nothing more than a Western protectorate. It will be administered by the EU, but will act as a spearhead of a more general US-led offensive against a Russia that is resurgent, thanks to its growing revenues from oil and gas. In every respect, it represents a grave threat to the peoples of Europe and the entire world.

In Kosovo itself, Serbia has denied that it will respond militarily, while the former KLA leader, Thaci, has vowed to protect the rights of minorities and ensure “security for all citizens”. Neither pledge counts for much.

The 16,000-strong NATO force is already preparing for conflict. About half of the Serb population lives south of the Ibar River in enclaves among the overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian population. The

rest are in Serb-dominated areas in the north, where around 5,000 ethnic Albanians live. In the northern part of the divided border town of Mitrovica, Serb leaders announced they would form their own parliament answering only to Belgrade. Troops have laid concrete and razor-wire barriers.

Britain, already under pressure in Afghanistan and Iraq, is now expected to send up to 1,000 extra troops to Kosovo and has placed its last remaining reserve battalion, the Spearhead Lead Element, on standby to deploy. Speaking to the *Daily Telegraph*, Major General Martin Rutledge, who is in charge of policing Kosovo, warned, “If my office got it wrong we could significantly destabilise events that are going to unfold in the next few months. I don’t think that’s an overstatement. We are playing for quite high stakes.”

The *Telegraph* notes that for the past nine years, “the military ambitions of the former Kosovo Liberation Army’s leaders have been curtailed by absorbing its commanders into the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) — a civil defence force which acts as a fire service and is partly armed.”

The force is to halve in size after independence. “If we lost their trust they would have every opportunity to go off and do things we would not want them to,” said Rutledge. “They certainly know where the weapons are and how to get weapons so it is very important to dissolve them with dignity ... In this environment it only needs few people to do something inappropriate.”

Fear of such a development, of mounting conflict with Russia, and of the spread of separatist sentiment has led to divisions within Europe, with Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Slovakia, Portugal, Malta, Bulgaria and Romania arguing against a declaration of independence. Some of the 27 EU nations are expected to state their formal opposition to the setting up of a Kosovo state today.

Events prompted the *Guardian*’s Simon Tisdall to warn of “a moment of great peril for Europe ... As the UN bows out, Kosovo will effectively become an EU protectorate, under its costly, possibly indefinite supervision. Whether the EU countries, divided among themselves, endemically infirm of purpose, and facing many other demands on military and nation-building resources (such as Bosnia, Chad, Lebanon and Afghanistan) are equal to this task is open to question.”



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