

Deep divisions in Europe over Kosovo independence

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Deep divisions emerged at the European Union meeting in Brussels on Monday, with the assembled Foreign Ministers unable to arrive at a unified position with regard to the declaration of independence made by the Kosovan Prime Minister on Sunday.

Spain had already made clear prior to the declaration that it would not recognise an independent Kosovo, and on Monday Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos reaffirmed to the press: "The government of Spain will not recognize the unilateral act".

Other EU countries publicly opposing independence for Kosovo include Greece, Cyprus, Slovakia, Portugal, Malta, Bulgaria and Romania. This means that nearly a third of the member states of the European Union have made clear they intend to refuse recognition to Kosovo.

On the other hand, the major European powers moved rapidly to express their solidarity with Pristina. The initiative in recognising Kosovo was taken by the French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who declared on Monday: "We intend to recognize Kosovo". Kouchner went on to say that the French President Nicolas Sarkozy had already written to the president of Kosovo informing him of the French decision.

French recognition of the new mini-state was followed by statements from British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who told reporters that their respective governments would also recognize Kosovo. Italy has also made clear that it plans to recognize the new country.

In the debate on Kosovo independence, EU officials have facilitated agreement by member countries by sleight-of-hand. The declaration of independence made by the Kosovan parliament on Sunday is regarded by legal experts as a travesty of the resolution (1244) drawn up for the governance of the province of Kosovo by the United Nations Security Council in June 1999, following the extensive bombing of Serbia by NATO forces. Resolution 1244 called for the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces but made no mention of independence and referred instead to the "territorial integrity" of Yugoslavia.

In order to ease recognition of Kosovo by EU countries and overcome the palpably illegal nature of the declaration made Sunday, foreign ministers devised an escape clause on Monday which declared that the province's history of "conflict, ethnic cleansing and humanitarian catastrophe" in the 1990s by Serbia exempted it from a rule which stipulates that international borders can only be changed with the agreement of all parties. This utterly undemocratic initiative now allows EU countries to recognize Kosovo's independence as an exception to the rule of "territorial integrity" of nations under international law.

According to international protocol, it was expected that the EU would be first in line to proclaim its policy on Kosovo, based on the argument that this is a "European issue", but the first statement acknowledging independence came from the other side of the Atlantic. In an interview with NBC on Monday, US President George W. Bush rushed to recognize Kosovo's declaration of independence. "The Kosovars are now independent," he said adding "It's something I've advocated with my government."

Bush's statement was quickly amended by White House spokeswoman Dana Perino who denied that Bush's comments amounted to US recognition of independence. "He didn't announce that," she said. "What he meant by that is that the Kosovars have declared their independence." Perino reminded the press that it is the job of the US State Department to officially declare recognition.

On Monday, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that Washington had formally recognized Kosovo as "a sovereign and independent state." In an official statement, Rice declared, "President Bush has responded affirmatively to a request from Kosovo to establish diplomatic relations between our two countries."

Bush's eagerness to unilaterally declare US support for Kosovo independence underscores the significance of this issue for the White House, which is seeking to use the conflict over Kosovo to increase the isolation of Russia and deepen divisions inside Europe.

Independence for Kosovo has been a major priority for Bush during the past year. Following his participation in the G8 summit in Germany last summer, Bush flew straight to Albania, where he promised Kosovo Albanians in Tirana that they would become citizens of an independent state. Bush called for an end to "endless dialogue" that was getting nowhere and predicted Kosovo independence by the end of the year. Now, just six weeks after the deadline announced by Bush, many of those in the crowds of independence supporters celebrated the declaration on Sunday in Kosovo by waving both the Albanian national flag and the Stars and Stripes.

The White House has taken an increasingly aggressive stance towards Russia in recent years, notably through US activity in the so-called "colour revolutions" in the Ukraine and Georgia. American support for Kosovo represents another major step towards the encirclement of Russia by the US and NATO powers and is in line with fresh propaganda from US think tanks aimed at reviving the Cold War - this time with Russia in the role formerly played by the Soviet Union.

The revival of hostilities with Russia was a central theme at the Munich Security Conference held just a week ago in Germany, and statements made in and around the conference make clear that the

increasing demonisation of Russia is not only a central plank of White House policy, but is also supported by broader political circles.

One day before the conference, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* printed a statement by Republican presidential candidate John McCain, in which he demanded that Russia be thrown out of the G-8, that support be given to the independence of Kosovo, and that a so-called “league of democracies” be set up under US leadership, as an alternative to the UN.

McCain’s plea for a harsher line against Russia was then taken up one day later by one of the most prominent US right-wing ideologues, Robert Kagan, who in the same newspaper declared: “Seen geographically, Russia and the European Union might be neighbours, but geopolitically they live in different centuries.”

Kagan then sketched out a scenario for a European-Russian war, enumerating the potential triggers for such a conflict “in diplomatic stand-offs over Kosovo, Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia; in conflicts over gas and oil pipelines; in nasty diplomatic exchanges between Russia and Britain; and in a return to Russian military exercises of a kind not seen since the Cold War.”

US support for Kosovan independence is based on a policy aimed at isolating Russia as a major player in trade and foreign policy in Asian countries and the Middle East, while undermining stability in one of Washington’s principal rivals — Europe.

While some European countries, such as Germany, have taken a cautious but increasingly critical approach to US military policy in Central Asia (Afghanistan) and the Middle East (Iran), the major EU powers are intent on ensuring that the US does not monopolise economic and political developments in former Yugoslavia. This is why Germany, which has developed close trade links with former Yugoslav states and has a long tradition of political involvement in the region, is now supporting the declaration of Kosovan independence alongside the US.

At the same time, a number of commentators have pointed out that the setting up of a new mini-state in the heart of Europe is fraught with enormous risks. The seventh state to be founded on the territory of former Yugoslavia since 1990, Kosovo is utterly unviable as an independent entity. It has an estimated unemployment rate of 50 percent and no reliable electricity grid for the provision of power. Although corruption is rife within the Kosovan regime, which is based on the former CIA-backed UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army), nothing has been done by the existing EU and NATO protectorate to curb the criminal practices of the country’s ruling elite.

According to the Spanish newspaper *ABC*: “The country is neither ready, nor viable. Kosovo needs international help on every level — economic, military, police and administrative — to survive and be transformed into a state worthy of its name. ... This independence is a European failure, no doubt not the last, for there still remain many problems to be resolved in this long and bloody dismembering of the former Yugoslavia...of which the separate parts, paradoxically, wish, in a future of interdependence, to unite in a European Union that is gradually being filled with small, ethnically homogenous states...So a new dependent state has been born in Europe. That’s nothing to be proud of.”

The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* comes to a similar assessment and declares there is no basis for jubilation over the declaration of independence: “The independence which has finally been achieved barely deserves the name. Constitution, flag and coat of arms, even the day of the proclamation were imposed on the Kosovans, irrespective of their nationality, under the supervision of leading western powers.

What is now being feted as the birth of new state is hardly more than the setting up of another European semi-protectorate in the Balkans.”

The unstable political situation within Kosovo is also demonstrated by the fact that a total of 3,000 United Nations police and 3,000 NATO-led troops are currently engaged in defending the territory’s Serbian minority. Following the declaration of independence, it is now expected that these contingents will have to be reinforced dramatically.

Violent clashes have already begun. On Monday, thousands of Serbs demonstrated in northern Kosovo, chanting “This is Serbia,” and “Down with America!” Crowds marched towards the bridge in the divided town of Kosovska Mitrovica but were held back by NATO soldiers.

At the same time, the Serbian government stepped up its campaign of opposition to Kosovo’s independence. On Monday, Serbia’s Interior Ministry filed charges against three Kosovo-Albanian leaders, including Prime Minister Hacim Thaci, accusing them of committing a “serious criminal act against the constitutional order and security of Serbia,” by proclaiming a “false state.”

Meanwhile, the Belgrade government recalled its ambassador from Washington in retaliation for the US recognition of Kosovan independence. Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica announced the withdrawal of the ambassador, calling it the “first urgent measure” to be taken against those countries recognizing Kosovo. “This statement by the US cannot make a false state true,” he said, “but before the entire world it has demonstrated the violent face of the US policy of brutal force.”

Speaking to the United Nations Security Council Monday Serbian President Boris Tadic denounced the unilateral declaration of independence as a violation of international law and a threat to stability internationally. “If you cast a blind eye to this illegal act, who guarantees to you that parts of your countries will not declare independence in the same illegal way?” he said. “Who can guarantee that a blind eye will not be cast to the violation of the charter of the United Nations, which guarantees the sovereignty and integrity of each state, when your country’s turn comes up?”

He asked the 15-member council, “Are we all aware of the precedent that is being set and are we aware of the catastrophic consequences that it may lead to?”

Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, voiced strong support for the Serbian position, calling Kosovo’s declaration of independence “a blatant breach of the norms and principles of international law.” Meanwhile, China’s Ambassador Wang Guangya made a similar statement, saying the move posed a “serious challenge to the fundamental principals of international law.” These two veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council are blocking any formal UN recognition of the newly declared state.

Nearly a century after the outbreak of the First World War, the major European imperialist powers and America are once again lighting matches to the “Balkan powder keg” with their support for Kosovan independence, threatening a conflagration with consequences for the entire region and beyond.



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