

**Kosovo Isn't the Problem, Serbia Is**

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\*The views expressed here are not those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not take positions on policy issues.

It is a pleasure to be here today to offer my personal views—not those of the US Institute of Peace, which does not take positions on policy issues—on the challenges facing the United States and Europe in the aftermath of Kosovo’s independence.

My main point is this: Kosovo isn’t the problem, Serbia is. I will offer a policy on Serbia that departs from what we have been doing. I call it the Clear Path Forward, because it makes clear what Belgrade needs to do to make its way towards Europe.

### **Kosovars celebrate but have not misbehaved**

Independence generated excitement and celebration in Kosovo, but its Albanian population—about 90 per cent of the total—has refrained from violence against minorities. Despite provocations, Kosovars have *not* sought, as some feared they might, to chase Serbs from the new state. This correct behavior needs to continue.

Kosovo needs massive assistance, but it also needs wise restraint to develop as a state. While providing international judges and prosecutors as well as police monitors, we need to be careful not to create dependency: politicians who feel no obligation to take on tough issues because they know the internationals will act. States need to make their own mistakes. We should intervene only to prevent the potentially fatal ones.

### **Belgrade is trying to turn back the clock**

While Albanians celebrate, Serbs are protesting. Serb police supported rioters who burned UN and Kosovo police checkpoints near the now international border. Serbia’s minister for Kosovo hailed these efforts as consonant with government policy, thus disrespecting UN Security Council resolution 1244, to which Belgrade often appeals, and causing Kosovo Serbs to ask him to resign. Young extremists attacked the US and other embassies, left unguarded during a government-endorsed demonstration. There have also been riots outside Belgrade, as well as attacks on independent media.

The Serbian government is trying to turn back the clock. Parliament, where no Kosovar has sat since Milosevic deprived the province of autonomy almost 20 years ago, announced it had annulled the independence declaration and declared deployment of an EU mission to maintain rule of law unacceptable. The Supreme Court failed to act when the Serbian government struck Kosovars from the voter rolls to ensure approval of a new constitution prohibiting recognition of Kosovo’s independence, but it quickly denounced the independence declaration as illegal.

The Prime Minister praised the youthful rioters after the US embassy attack, accused the President of the United States of violence against Serbia and claimed, “As long as the Serbian people exist, Kosovo remains Serbia,” no matter what its population wants. Serbia’s ambassador to Washington has been recalled. Serbia’s president has pledged he will never accept Kosovo independence. One of its leading bishops has called for the Serbian army and police to retake Kosovo, after rearming with Russian supplies. Belgrade has encouraged secession rumblings in the Serb half of Bosnia.

The situation in northern Kosovo is particularly dangerous. If NATO and the EU allow continued Serbian control there—as the UN and NATO have for nine years—there will be division along ethnic lines, with consequences for Bosnia and Macedonia. Pristina cannot assert sovereignty in the north without creating big problems; the EU and NATO need to do it on Pristina's behalf, blocking Belgrade's partition plans.

### **Serbia is the problem**

Serbia, not Kosovo, is the problem in the Balkans.

Its leadership promised to hold on to Kosovo and cannot now deliver. By keeping the issue open, the prime minister aims to strengthen nationalists, whose most extreme political party is already the largest in the Serbian parliament, and slow Serbia's democratic transition. Belgrade's refusal to accept a sovereign Kosovo will limit its influence in international bodies and scare off foreign investors. Serbia's current path leads to isolation from Europe and the US as well as alignment with Russia, which has been paid off for its role in blocking a UN Security Council resolution on Kosovo with advantageous Serbian energy deals.

Brussels and Washington tried to prevent this sad turn of events by offering, up front and without conditions, a series of incentives. These included normal trade relations, membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace, negotiation of a Stabilization and Association Agreement opening European markets, over one billion euros in assistance in 2007-11, facilitated visas for EU entry and extensive protection for Serbs remaining in Kosovo. Since Milosevic's fall, the EU has already provided billions of euros in aid and preferential credits; the US has provided \$635 million in assistance.

Serbia has pocketed these incentives and provided little in return since 2003.

### **We need better policy**

It is time for Washington and Brussels to get smarter. While hoping that Serbia will come to its senses sooner rather than later, both need to plan for a long period in which Belgrade, aligned with Moscow, will try to block NATO and EU expansion in the Balkans. Transitional democracies in Croatia, Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo will have to share the Western Balkans with a backward-looking, resentful and ill-spirited Serbia. NATO and the EU should move quickly to welcome as members those countries that are doing the right thing, in the hope that will encourage Serbia to come along.

Washington and Brussels should also signal that they are determined not to give Serbia any more freebies. Ambassadors should be recalled for consultations on a new, coordinated EU/US Serbia policy. The still unsigned Stabilization and Association Agreement should be taken off the table. The people, including Serbian security officials, who participated in attacking checkpoints inside Kosovo should be brought to trial quickly in a Pristina courtroom, under EU supervision.

At the same time, Brussels and Washington need to make clear that there is a route out of the dead end into which Serbia has driven itself, provided it meets reasonable conditions. American and European ambassadors should return to Belgrade once Serbia ends violence against the legitimate forces of law and order in Kosovo and begins to cooperate with NATO and the EU there. If Serbia turns indicted war criminal Ratko Mladic over to the Hague Tribunal, the Stabilization and Association Agreement should proceed. Serbian candidacy for EU membership should be conditional on Kosovo's entry into the UN, currently blocked by a Russian veto threat at Belgrade's behest.

By laying out a Clear Path Forward to improved relations conditional on Belgrade's behavior, Brussels and Washington can over time bring Serbia out of its funk and enable it to occupy its rightful place in Europe. Offering more freebies without conditions will have the opposite effect, encouraging reactionary forces in Serbia and strengthening its alliance with Russia.

I hasten to add that generous support should go to the courageous Serbs who have continued—despite the prevailing political winds—to advocate human rights, free media, dialogue with Kosovars and doing what is necessary to get Serbia into the EU. Likewise, Voice of America and RFE/RL should continue to broadcast in Serbian and Albanian.

### **Collateral damage**

Let me briefly address the issue of collateral damage due to Kosovo's independence, in particular in Bosnia and in American relations with Russia.

In Bosnia, the only serious risk arises from Belgrade encouraging Serb separatists. Left to their own devices, Bosnia's Serb leaders prefer being someone in Sarajevo to being no one in Belgrade. The US and EU need to make it clear that Republika Srpska can either exist within Bosnia, or not exist at all and have its territory—which was home to a Muslim majority before the war—become part of a unitary Bosnian state.

With Russia, it is time to put Kosovo in the past, starting at the April NATO Summit in Bucharest. This can be done by considering Russia's interests across a wide spectrum of issues—including anti-ballistic missile radars, NATO enlargement and Moscow's ties to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We need Moscow to abstain from using its veto to block Kosovo's UN membership. Without caving to the Russians, we need to ask ourselves what they will value that the US can give up without high cost.

### **Conclusion**

We have done the right thing to join our European partners in recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state, a move that has prevented much worse violence and instability than we have seen so far. We need now to repair relations with Serbia by delineating a Clear Path Forward and patiently awaiting Belgrade's realization that its citizens will be far better off if their government embarks on it. It may take a long time for that to happen.