



KOSOVO

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Why Kosovo is central to Serb national epic

By Robert Marquand, Christian Science Monitor

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After eight years of United Nations' rule in Kosovo, the idea that the cradle of Serb identity might be lost is being met here with a mix of shock, denial, resignation, and outrage. With a Dec. 10 deadline looming on the status of Kosovo – and with Serbs and Kosovars in Brussels Friday for negotiations – talk of independence for Serbia's mythic region is opposed at every turn, by nearly every Belgrade politician, amid tidal waves of patriotic media.

"We lost Kosovo in 1999, but we aren't ready to give it up." says Alexandr Vasic, who was 16 when NATO bombed Belgrade to stop Serb forces in Kosovo. "Do I want to join Europe? Yes. Do I want to give up Kosovo? No."

For Serbians, Kosovo is not just a territory. It is an epic poem, a deep pool of collective heroic memory, a cradle of religious and national identity dating to the 14th century – even if it is now 90 percent Albanian, dominated by a language that 99 percent of Serbs can't understand, and hasn't been controlled by Belgrade for nearly a decade.

In this proud Balkan capital, the idea of losing Kosovo has never quite taken hold, experts say. It was always a blurry future issue. Now, with Dec. 10 fast approaching, European and US diplomats and nongovernmental organizations hope that local politicians will prepare the public for a change, and focus on Serbia joining Europe. But so far the opposite discourse is under way: Parliamentary battles on TV are awash in Kosovo recrimination, conspiracy theories, and anger. Much talk in Belgrade is on how to enshrine Kosovo as a permanent dispute – a Northern Ireland, Cyprus, or Kashmir – in the Balkans.

"I was at the swearing-in ceremony of [President] Kostunica, after [former president Slobodan] Milosevic was toppled," says Albert Rohan, Austria's former foreign minister and deputy to the UN special envoy to Kosovo. "I heard over and over that we are tired of Kosovo, we want jobs, we don't want to die to defend Kosovo, we want money and a better life. But this talk has changed."

Much new talk is fueled by statements from Russia that it will block Kosovo's independence in the UN Security Council, and by a feeling that the US and Europe are too preoccupied, or too divided, to carry out what is often called the last chapter of the Balkan wars of the 1990s. This week, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in his first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, agreed that a way must be found to avoid humiliating Serbia in an eventual deal. But Mr. Sarkozy told Mr. Putin that



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"the independence of Kosovo will be recognized by Europeans" if no progress is made.

Stronger desire for Kosovo now

Many Serbs who feel that the Kosovo independence quest could get ugly or bumpy say the West should have taken Kosovo directly after the 1998 war, rather than let the question rise again.

To be sure, Belgrade today is rebuilt. Gas is no longer sold under highway overpasses. Reforms are under way. Some mafias have been cleaned up. In 2000, inflation was 140 percent. There were no credible banks. Today, huge billboards advertise brand-name fashion and sports products. Banks dot the downtown area. Inflation is 8 percent. Australia and Serb tennis teams recently played matches in the attractive national stadium.

Diplomats like Hans Ola Urstad, ambassador to Belgrade from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, worry that a major crisis over Kosovo could bring isolation and reversal to a state just starting to turn around.

"Just as we are getting to normal, Kosovo has come up again," says Mr. Urstad. "So much of the political energy and focus goes into this one issue. Kosovo has to be solved. It is lasting too long. The longer it isn't solved, the more Serbia will suffer a setback. What does Kosovo add? Nothing."

This week, Kosovo's Prime Minister Agim Çeku said the province may declare independence shortly after Dec. 10 if no deal is struck. As the deadline approaches, one new idea being promoted quietly here might be called "active ignoring."

"The political elite don't want Albanians in Serbian society, but they want the territory," says a Belgrade intellectual who requested anonymity. "UN legitimacy becomes a crucial point. If the UN doesn't back the independence of Kosovo, then you can say it didn't happen. They need to maintain the illusion that we control Kosovo, and avoid the humiliation of losing it. What they care about is how Serbian kids today will control the map of Serbia in 20 to 30 years."

A heartland akin to Jerusalem

For Serbs, Kosovo represents a heartland similar to that of Jerusalem for the Jews. If you ask Americans about the Alamo, or Britons about King Arthur, you might detect a slight pulse. But ask many Serbs about Kosovo, and the pulse positively races.

The Field of Blackbirds near Kosovo Polje was the seat of a heroic losing battle between Orthodox Serbia, led by Prince Lazar, and Muslim Turks. Every Serb child learns the poem "The Dream of Tzar Lazar," which takes place the night before the battle.



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In the poem, Lazar is given a bitter cup to choose – a heavenly cup or an earthly one. He chooses the heavenly cup even though it means Lazar's army will lose. The Serbs (Lazar included) are wiped out in a battle that gives Kosovo to the Turks for 500 years. In Serb mythology, their reward is in heaven for making the right choice.

Gavrilo Princip used the Kosovo myth in his decision to shoot Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo, which led to World War I; Mr. Milosevich used Kosovo psychology in 1988 to begin his rise to power from a gray Yugoslav bureaucrat to Serbian president. He died in 2006 while on trial for war crimes in Bosnia and Kosovo.

"Asking Serbs whether they choose Kosovo or Europe is a stupid question," says Marko Blagojevic, head of the polling company CeSID in Belgrade. "It is like asking whether I want to lose my right or my left leg."

The problem at present is that Kosovo is 90 percent Albanian, and the Albanians do not want to participate in a Serbia they are not wanted in.

"Why did the international community come down on the side of independence and not sovereignty?," asks Mr. Rohan. "Because you can't ignore what happened between '89 and '99, the killings, the Serbian police squads and thugs. You can't really say all of a sudden they are nice guys in Belgrade and so lets go back to before 1989. You can't go back to something viscerally rejected by 90 percent of the people there."