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Why Kosovo Wasn't Worth It

By Ruth Wedgwood, Newsweek
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In February, with U.S. backing, Kosovo declared its independence—nine years after NATO went to war to end Serbia's thuggish behavior in the province. Shortly after Kosovo hoisted its new national flag, Russia, Serbia's patron, warned (in the words of its foreign minister) that the theory of secession used to strip away Kosovo had "created a precedent" applicable elsewhere. Now, in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Georgia—supposedly for the protection of separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—it's a good time to pause and ask, was Kosovo worth it?

A recent visit to the tiny country underscores how difficult life can be for a microstate. The good news is that Kosovo has a young pro-Western population that speaks English, has strong tech skills and is excited at the thought of creating a new government.

But there is plenty of bad news. The unemployment rate for young people is 60 percent. The landlocked, mountainous country has a long growing season and could serve as a garden for Europe, but it lacks any transport beyond two-lane roads, a rusting rail line and expensive air links. The current prime minister, Hashim Thaci—a former leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)—promises to build a real highway to next-door Albania in five years, but that's hardly the best path to the outside world. Meanwhile, the electricity frequently shuts off for hours at a time, even in the capital, Pristina, and the construction of a World Bank-financed power plant has been slowed by quarrels over who will supply the coal.

Pristina bustles with restaurants supported by a large population of international personnel whose spending habits outprice the locals. The roads leading to Kosovo's borders are lined with half-completed brick houses. But these are funded by remittances from young people who've left to work in Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Inside the country, the economy is so bad that many fear that unemployed young men will start turning to old-fashioned, illicit forms of cross-border commerce: trafficking in narcotics, weapons or human beings.

As for the government of this nascent state, there's still a great deal of confusion about who's in charge. Blocked by Russia, the U.N. Security Council has not been able to lift its supervisory political framework put in place after the NATO intervention. The international proconsul, Lamberto Zannier—the U.N. secretary-general's special representative—remains in Kosovo, though his duties have become increasingly unclear. But he's still needed, since Belgrade refuses to talk directly to the Kosovo



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government. The U.N. Mission is also the only local authority accepted by the many Serbs who still live in northern Kosovo, including in the contested city of Mitrovica.

The European Union and the United States have recently mounted an independent effort to help the fledgling state write laws and solve administrative problems. But the wiring of this operation would fox any electrician. The EU was to deploy 1,700 police, judges, prosecutors, jail guards and Customs officials to help, but their assignments have been delayed because of the confusion over who's in charge. More than 15,000 NATO troops remain on duty in the tiny state. But NATO forces failed to control ethnic riots the last time they broke out, in March 2004, with disastrous consequences, including eight reported deaths, 900 injured, the destruction of hundreds of Serb homes and the burning of churches and priceless artifacts. NATO countries have since loosened the rules of engagement that hamstrung the troops, but they remain soldiers, not police, and it's not clear whether they have the tools for nonlethal riot control.

The recent return of former KLA leader Ramush Haradinaj to political life may further roil the new state. Haradinaj was acquitted in April by The Hague tribunal on charges of complicity in the murder of Serb civilians during the war. This decision, following the intimidation and deaths of witnesses, further unnerved the local Serb community, and Haradinaj's return may also threaten Thaci's leadership.

Internationally, the outlook isn't much brighter. Only 45 countries have recognized Kosovo's independence. It will never be admitted to the United Nations while veto-wielding Russia opposes it, though it can join the World Bank, where no vetoes can be cast. Among its European neighbors, Bosnia, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Slovakia—and, notably, Georgia—have all refused to grant recognition. Kosovo's newly issued passports may go unrecognized at international airports, leaving Kosovar travelers stranded.

Although the United States pushed for Kosovo's independence earlier this year, at least one former U.S. secretary of State, Lawrence Eagleburger, warned against it, saying that the creation of new microstates would needlessly provoke Russia and other multiethnic countries. The irony is that Kosovo could have achieved almost as much through an international guarantee of autonomy within Serbia. Yet Washington never permitted that alternative to be discussed. Now, given Russia's misuse of the Kosovo precedent in Georgia, it's worth reviewing this option should similar cases arise in the future.

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