



KOSOVO

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Kosovo signals the age of the micro-state

By Bronwen Maddox, The Times

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If Kosovo decides to declare independence from Serbia on Monday, it could trigger more fighting — or be the inspiration for more provinces and regions to try to make themselves into new micro-states.

Kosovo is unique, US and European diplomats have said firmly, as they have struggled to contain the row about its future within the United Nations. It is a UN protectorate within the sovereign country of Serbia, and its fate sets no precedents, they have tried to say. But talks would not have been so tortuous had many countries not seen exactly that: a resonant precedent for many miniature would-be nations.

Separation has its uses, as a way of avoiding ethnic friction, or of freeing up small groups to run their own affairs as they want. The value of being part of a big state is less than it was. All the same, separation represents a failure, in many cases, of an attempt to devise rules for different people to live harmoniously together.

In Kosovo's case, the diplomacy may fall apart on Monday, the deadline for Serbs and Albanians to agree. It can safely be assumed they will not. Albanians, 90 per cent of Kosovo's two million people, want independence; Serbia wants anything short of that. A report announcing that failure will go to the UN Security Council. And then? For all the planning, no one is sure.

If Kosovo unilaterally declares independence, as it is very likely to do, then the US will want to recognise it. So will the European Union, if its members to agree. Spain and Greece have objected, fearing a precedent that their own minorities may find useful, but they may be persuaded.

The biggest obstacle is Russia, a longtime ally of Serbia, which says that it will veto any resolution. The US and EU may well decide that it is better to have a resolution vetoed by Russia than none at all.

Independence is the only future that Albanian Kosovars say they can contemplate after the 1999 conflict, when Serb forces tried to expel many of them from the province. Recent violence is not why some Belgians consider splitting their country in two, nor Scots detaching themselves from the rest of the UK; the moves spring from a desire to see their “national” character more fully realised by their own leaders.



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They have a point. Defence, one of the prime functions of a state, can now, with negotiation, be brought in through membership of a larger club. With trade barriers lower and capital markets more open, the economic advantages of being large have diminished. The US stands as a remarkable exception, with India as its only fellow traveller in trying to unite so many very different people in a democracy. Both do it only through extreme federalism, the US knitting together the whole with an explicit core of common values, plus a vocal patriotism that Europeans find toe-curling, and India tolerating a degree of regional corruption and feudalism that should be intolerable.

But would-be tiny states too easily assume that they can carry the best of the present into an independent future. Their ability to renegotiate relations with others will be slim, if those are not to their liking.

That is true of defence above all. Kosovo's arrogance is to assume that, even if it makes itself a new nation in the most provocative of circumstances, someone will defend it, because it cannot defend itself. It is assuming that Europe will find it intolerable to have a new conflict in its backyard. That is probably right, but it is a risky gamble.