



# KOSOVO

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## Partition is the best answer to the Kosovo question

By Ivor Roberts, The Independent

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It was entirely predictable that talks over the future of Kosovo between the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians should end last week with no agreement. There are two main reasons why this problem is proving so intractable: one ancient, one modern.

The loss of Kosovo, the cradle of Serb civilisation, to the Ottoman Turks over 600 years ago was felt as keenly as the loss of Jerusalem by the Jews to Roman imperial forces. When at last Serbia re-acquired Kosovo after the first Balkan War of 1912, the ensuing territorial division left more than half the Albanian people outside the borders of the new Albanian state and with a deep sense of grievance. Let me quote the bitter parting words of Isa Boletini, the leader of Albania's delegation to the London Ambassadors' Conference of 1913 which confirmed Kosovo as part of Serbia: "When spring comes, we will manure the plains of Kosovo with the bones of Serbs, for we Albanians have suffered too much to forget."

Since then, in what we may call more modern times, whoever has been top dog in Kosovo has maltreated the other. This has generally, and most egregiously under Slobodan Milosevic, meant Serbs maltreating Albanians, though when the boot has been on the other foot, it has been applied with some vigour.

Moreover, it was hard to imagine that an agreement would be reached last week when the Kosovar Albanians had already been told that their position on independence was being supported by the US and the EU. When President Bush visited Albania last June, he told an enthusiastic crowd that Kosovo should be independent. By thus removing any incentive for the Kosovar Albanians to compromise on their independence stance, the US fatally undermined the negotiations before they began.

Given the impasse we have reached, where the West is mainly committed to supporting qualified Albanian independence and Russia is equally committed to blocking any agreement in the Security Council which does not command support from Serbia, it may be timely to look at imaginative alternative solutions.

The West is fond of the mantra that the status quo is not sustainable. What they really mean is that Kosovar Albanian expectations of imminent independence have been raised to such an extreme that any frustration of independence will lead to violence against the Nato forces. So we must give Kosovo its independence quickly. The status quo is very unstable, but we must change it in ways which make it better, not worse. So Kosovo should become independent, but not within its present borders.



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Within the negotiating process, one of the excluded options (self-imposed by the international community), was that Kosovo should not be partitioned. It is hard to understand the intellectual underpinning of this policy when the old Yugoslavia has been progressively partitioned and when the proposal to give Kosovo its independence is itself a partition of Serbia. The unstated concern is clearly that the partition of Kosovo could lead to pressure for a partitioning of Bosnia, a proposition which the international community themselves incidentally accepted (and later retracted) during the negotiations to bring the war in Bosnia to an end.

Again, the Kosovar Albanians have been told that they are not allowed in the event of independence to unite with Albania. This is absurd: if two independent countries freely wish to unite and do not destabilise their neighbours in doing so, there is no justifiable reason why they should be prevented from going ahead.

Whatever the pious hopes of the West and its diplomats, multi-ethnicity has failed in Bosnia and Kosovo. (Neither Bosnian Croats nor Serbs pass the Tebbit cricket test.) But the determination to deny the failure has led to incoherent policies by the West, pushing for more centralisation in Bosnia to weaken the Bosnian Serb entity to the benefit of the Bosnian central government, while going in the other direction in Kosovo to the point of secession. As the West's aspirations for tolerance and multi-ethnicity in Kosovo have proved to be so much empty rhetoric, we need to impose a solution which offers security to both communities. That requires the partition of Kosovo.

Partition of Kosovo will please neither side, but the equality of pain is more likely to lead to stability than present Western plans which will undoubtedly destabilise Serbia, and through Serbia the whole region. It is hard to explain to Serbs why, when Milosevic was still in power, a settlement was imposed which left Kosovo legally and formally part of Serbia. But having overthrown Milosevic and lived according to the rules of the international community for the last seven years, the Serbs now face being punished by losing nearly 20 per cent of their territory. It is not a policy which is likely to strengthen the already fragile plant of democracy in Serbia. The fires of nationalism risk being reignited.

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