



KOSOVO

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Welcome to Kosovo, the Next Failed State?

By Mark Kramer, Washington Post

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Kosovo's decision to declare independence was a bad idea. The U.S. decision to recognize it was worse -- and not because it prompted a crowd of angry Serbs to torch the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade.

Even if the pint-size chunk of the Balkans does not degenerate into failed statehood like Sudan or Somalia, it almost certainly will remain in its current perilous condition and become a European bastion of criminality and human trafficking. Recognizing Kosovo also sends a bizarre message to separatist movements around the world: If you resort to violence, the West might support you; if you're peaceful, you haven't got a prayer.

That was certainly the message to Ibrahim Rugova and his Democratic League of Kosovo.

Rugova, a former professor of literature who used to hand out stones from his rock collection to visiting dignitaries (the more he liked you, the better the rock), formed his movement in late 1989 to offer peaceful resistance to Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. Milosevic had rescinded Kosovo's autonomy and clamped down on its majority Albanian population as part of his murderous plan to carve a "Greater Serbia" from the ashes of the former Yugoslavia. But for nearly a decade, Rugova received no support from Western countries, which largely ignored the region. The Dayton Agreement of 1995, ending the bloody war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, made no mention of Kosovo.

Not until the Albanian-run Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) came on the scene in 1997 with a guerrilla campaign against Serbian troops and terrorist attacks on civilians did the Clinton administration begin to pay attention to Kosovo, inadvertently rewarding the KLA and its terrorist violence. The KLA deliberately sought to provoke Serbian reprisals, and Milosevic, with his usual obtuse brutality, readily obliged.

As the fighting escalated, the United States and other NATO countries agreed to take military action to halt Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing. But instead of dispatching ground troops, President Bill Clinton decided to rely solely on air power. The KLA in effect became NATO's boots on the ground.



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So when Milosevic agreed in June 1999 to withdraw Serbian forces from Kosovo, the KLA, empowered by NATO's pixie dust, filled the vacuum. For the next 15 months, the KLA-led government alienated most of the 2.5 million people in Kosovo -- Albanians and Serbs alike -- by engaging in violence, extortion and other abuses, including by all accounts widespread drug and gun running.

In October 2000, the situation finally seemed to improve when protesters across Serbia overthrew Milosevic, and Rugova's party won overwhelmingly in Kosovo's parliamentary elections, far eclipsing the KLA and paving the way for Rugova's emergence as president. Rugova sought close ties with the United States, and for a while U.S. officials provided him with valuable economic and diplomatic support.

But the KLA refused to disappear and sought to weaken Rugova's position by provoking violence against the region's Serb minority, roughly 10 percent of the population. The United States, preoccupied with Iraq and Afghanistan, mostly stood by and allowed the KLA to reemerge through intimidation and force.

Then in January 2006, Rugova died of lung cancer. And in elections last November, the KLA regained power, seeming just as intolerant as ever. The new prime minister, Hashim Thaci, who hid out in the woods with Albanian guerrillas in the late 1990s, not only was involved in terrorist acts as a KLA leader but is also known for his ruthlessness.

So why, out of all the groups in the world that are seeking independence (the Tibetans, the Kurds, the Tamils and others), do the Albanian Kosovars deserve to be singled out and accorded this prize?

Apparently, in the wake of last year's elections, many Western leaders feared that violence might erupt in Kosovo unless independence was granted soon. As such, Washington's recognition of the newly named Kosova once again gives the impression that the Kosovars are being rewarded solely because they might otherwise turn violent. Other independence-minded minorities will realize that if they rely on peaceful tactics, they will risk being ignored.

The poisonous impact of this whole episode on Serbian politics was underscored by the embassy attack in Belgrade. Although moderate Serb politicians, including President Boris Tadic, swiftly condemned the violence, even they now feel compelled to emphasize nationalist themes. Those who spearheaded the peaceful overthrow of Milosevic's murderous regime are now in danger of being accused of facilitating the country's dismemberment. And resentment over the forced relinquishment of Kosovo is bound to simmer for many years and stoke regional tension.

Another risk is that Kosova, the poorest region in Europe, will become a failed state and possibly a terrorist haven. Its economy would have stopped functioning long ago without life support from the United Nations, the European Union and the United



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States. Even if Kosovar officials were economic wizards, they would have a hard time meeting popular expectations, which have soared with independence. Moreover, the ethnic divide will likely intensify. The prospect of further violent clashes between Serbs and Albanians seems all too real, and Thaci's government may respond with ethnic cleansing.

Having recognized Kosova's independence with almost no public debate, Washington and its friends in Western Europe should be on their guard. Be careful what you wish for.

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