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# The World Today



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**Just seven years ago, Kosovo was recovering from the attempted ethnic cleansing of its Albanian population by Serb forces. NATO airstrikes ended the process and allowed refugees to return. Since then, the United Nations has been in charge and now, almost unnoticed, talks are underway to decide the future of the province.**



# Nationalist Hopes

**VIENNA IS FAMED IN THE ALBANIAN** world for possessing the original helmet of Skenderbeg, the national hero who resisted the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans in the fifteenth century. Nowadays, hopes in Kosovo and Albania itself have been focussed on the Vienna talks with the Serbs that are trying to negotiate the future of the province, which is still technically part of Serbia, though under United Nations control.

Since February, teams of Kosovo Albanian and Serb negotiators have been ensconced in a castle outside the Austrian capital, under the moderation of veteran Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, to decide the future of what on the surface should be the last Balkan conundrum left over from the wars of the Yugoslav succession.

Unlike the 1995 Dayton gathering that ended the Bosnian war and the 1999 Rambouillet conference, Vienna is a low-key affair. The delegations include almost no-one whose name resonates outside Kosovo, and there is none of the drama of Rambouillet, with rushed mobile phone links to Kosovo Liberation Army commanders still leading troops in the field, and the looming shadow of former President Slobodan Milosevic hanging over the conference. There has

been virtually no media interest.

The reality is that there is only one real outcome, a form of independence for Kosovo, and the only issues raised at Vienna are about how many bells and whistles that independence should have and how the future state can function.

In a recent Council of Europe paper, Lord Russell Johnson recommended that if the negotiations did not produce an agreed deal, the international community should impose a form of conditional independence. This is the accepted script around the world and the long-moribund Contact Group, with its origins in the Bosnian war period, has been reactivated to keep Russia on side with America, Britain and Europe. This is to try and prevent a UN Security Council veto on the new resolution that will be required to set the independence process in motion. This is the simple part. But in the well known phrase, the Devil lies in the Detail, and it remains to be seen what the detail is.

## Tensions

Ethnic relations are a clear problem. About half the Serb minority lives in two northern areas north of the Ibar River adjoining Serbia, and elsewhere there is still tension between the minority and majority in many rural localities. At the heart of these dilemmas has been the decentralisation issue, how to secure satisfactory protection for the five percent Serb minority within a dominant

93 percent ethnic Albanian majority, and how to keep it as an integral unit, that contributes to Balkan security rather than threatens it.

Numerous new municipalities under Serbian control have been proposed in Vienna. This has produced serious concern on the Albanian side that a new Republic Srpska-style arrangement will emerge on the ground with divisions like those in Bosnia. The Albanians are not unduly concerned about considerable autonomy in local affairs for the north Mitrovica and Leposavic areas, but the proposals for new rural authorities in the south-east adjoining the Preshevo Valley have touched raw nerves. They led to the Albanian side demanding the end of the Vienna talks in mid September.

Security is less of a problem. It is clear NATO will have a continuing role in an independent state, although the current KFOR mandate will need revision. An international community civil presence will also be needed to see that minorities are protected. But beyond Serbia and more nationalist elements in the Russian political spectrum, these concerns are seen as something that has to be resolved within a new independent state, not a UN protectorate.

Any case there might have been for continuing the current UN mission has been discredited by its well known failures over the past five years, with economic stagnation, corruption, recurring acute ethnic tension and regional insecurity.

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## Grey Areas

The shape of the new armed force is still undecided. The Kosovo Protection Corps has been trained as a kind of local national guard by British and United States government military advisers, and has won approval for its earthquake relief and other civil work. But it is mainly made up of ex-Kosovo Liberation Army veterans and has suffered from allegations of involvement in smuggling and other grey economy activities.

Belgrade is strongly opposed to any Kosovo force at all and this would almost certainly have to be imposed. The prevailing British and American view, particularly in the Ministry of Defence, is that the absence of an army would be destabilising and encourage the well-known local tendency towards underground paramilitary activity. An army command could be linked to NATO-country officers and improve security as a result.

The economy is in a poor state at a formal level, with more than a forty percent unemployment rate, although how far this is a real and complete picture is arguable, given the size of the grey sector. There is massive remittance income from the rich diaspora in countries such as Switzerland, Germany and the US.

The important lignite and mineral reserves are a marker for the future, and in time Kosovo will become an electricity exporting country in a region that is likely to suffer critical power

shortages. Major investment is needed before this can happen. There will be a difficult transition period when people have to accept a low standard of living as part of the independence deal.

European Union (EU) help and funding is always produced as a mantra to solve these problems, and it may well have a major role. But EU Common Agricultural Policy conditions and funding are weakest on the kind of small scale family farms and enterprises found in this and many other Balkan countries.

Far more food and drink could be produced to satisfy local demand. There are already some small industrial success stories, in brewing and meat production, for instance. But the final status deal must open the door to major foreign investment in these important sectors. This means a clear and unequivocal decision on sovereignty.

Governance issues are also crucial. There is pressure in some European countries to keep foreign relations under international control, but it is unclear how far this would be practical. What will happen about a Kosovo UN seat is also uncertain, especially if Serbia refuses to sign an agreement. A national flag, based on the ancient region of Dardania, as seen by Kosovo Albanian historians, is a virtual certainty.

## Serb Nationalism

A key issue will be the reaction of Belgrade to an imposed deal. It is

generally accepted internationally that no Serbian government will actually agree to any feasible deal, and there has been a debate in many foreign ministries about whether the imposition of an arrangement will produce elections in Serbia and the arrival of the extremely nationalist Radical party as the main force in a new government. The Radicals, still formally led by Vojislav Seseli, awaiting trial for war crimes at The Hague, score as much as forty percent in current opinion polls.

Observers, such as the US Institute of Peace, believe the Serbian political elite wants an imposed settlement anyway, as it will avoid any of them having to live with the reputation of signing away Kosovo. The Radicals are likely to achieve power fairly soon in any event. The majority of the politicians associated with the revolution of autumn 2000, when Milosevic was overthrown, are now discredited and in some cases out of politics altogether.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is obviously not happy with the prospect of independence but the important monasteries and religious sites have won back considerable areas of land, some of it not held since the end of Royalist Yugoslavia in the Second World War. In the vast majority of cases they will have security safeguards built into any deal, with Kosovo-Albanian agreement. It remains to be seen how the settlement will work, particularly in cases such as the Decani Monastery, where there are now no Serb residents in the vicinity and little prospect of returns.

How much of a threat would a Radical government be, whether it arrives as a result of a Kosovo deal or at some later stage next year? What are the other regional security factors? Given the strong NATO commitment to improving security, the US has been providing major incentives for the Serbian military to behave sensibly when the deal is done.

The Pentagon is believed to have offered Serbia fast-track progress in its relationship with NATO, the opportunity to send substantial numbers of men into US-led coalitions, and some hardware, a critical element of which might be modernisation of the air defence system.

As far as other neighbours are concerned, there is little private enthusiasm for an independent Kosovo, particularly in Bulgaria, but the Montenegrin independence referendum showed that Belgrade is no longer a desirable political partner in the southern Balkans. States such as Macedonia are reconciled to the outcome of the final status talks, and hope for association with NATO as early as 2008.

