

Albanians in the Balkans

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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is the product of a series of meetings, discussions, and travels between January and July of 2001 conducted through the United States Institute of Peace. Each event analyzed the role of Albanians throughout the Balkans as it has evolved since the 1999 NATO air campaign. The report examines the Albanian populations of Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania, and outlines the major issues Albanians face in each of these areas. The report also discusses the views of the governments and majority populations in Balkan states with large Albanian minorities.

Written by Balkans Initiative research assistant Samantha Williams, the report also includes contributions by Daniel Server, director of the Balkans Initiative.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

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Albanians in the Balkans

Briefly...

- The status of the Albanian population in several Balkan countries is now the greatest challenge to peace and stability in the region.
- Albanian extremists attacked the Macedonian state, and the response of Macedonian security forces brought the country close to civil war. Despite the agreement mediated by the European Union and the United States, the country remains dangerously polarized and implementation of the agreement is in doubt.
- The Kosovo Albanians seek independence, but the Yugoslav and Serbian governments—with support from the Kosovo Serb minority—want to maintain sovereignty over the province. The international community is unable to decide Kosovo's status, creating uncertainty that some see as destabilizing, and others view as a “least bad” choice for the moment.
- NATO mediation and Yugoslavia's handling of extremist violence in southern Serbia has provided an opening for the reintegration of Albanians and peaceful resolution of their legitimate concerns, as well as the re-establishment of Yugoslavia's control over the area. This could serve as a model for the region, if promised international assistance materializes.
- While the Albanian population of Montenegro is well integrated under President Djukanovic, political or constitutional change there could unsettle the situation.
- “Greater Albania,” consisting of the Albanian populations of Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania, is an objective of some in the diaspora, and a concern among governments in the region. However, few Albanians in the region are willing to fight for it.
- The international community will not be able to remove its military forces from the Balkans without first resolving issues relating to the Albanian population in the region.

Introduction

In the early 20th century the “Albanian question” was widely debated among European powers. Simply stated, the question these powers sought to resolve was how to handle the Albanian population in the Balkans, which was split between Albania and Slavic majority countries. The Albanian question has once again become prominent, especially in the wake of the 1999 NATO campaign against Yugoslavia, fought on behalf of the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo, and recent Albanian insurgencies in southern Serbia and Macedonia.

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The Albanian population in the Balkans, which is defined as a language group and includes Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims, is scattered throughout the region, with the largest concentrations existing in Albania proper; Macedonia; Kosovo; the areas of Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja in southern Serbia near the border with Kosovo; and Montenegro. There is also a substantial population of Albanians, known as Chams, in northern Greece. The exact population figures for Albanians in the Balkans are heavily disputed, and depend on who is providing them. Albanians tend to see themselves as underrepresented in the national censuses conducted by the governments of Macedonia and Yugoslavia, whereas the governments view their numbers as accurate. The following are the official population figures:

The Albanian Population in the Balkans

	Serbia (including Kosovo)	Montenegro	Macedonia	Albania
Population	9,981,929	680,158	2,041,467	3,490,435
Albanian Percentage	14%	7%	22.7%	95%

Source: 2001 CIA World Factbook

These figures are certainly low, but they nevertheless illustrate the strong presence of Albanians in the region.

Macedonia: Can It Hold?

Macedonian Perspectives

Tension between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians exploded into violence in February 2001. The emergence of the National Liberation Army (NLA) along the Macedonia-Kosovo border brought a new, militarized element to Albanian grievances that the Macedonian government, security forces, and public were largely unprepared to handle. Macedonians generally regard the NLA rebels as terrorists imported from Kosovo, with the tacit or even explicit support of NATO. Many Macedonians believe the objective of the NLA is to create a Greater Albania, or at the least a Greater Kosovo. They doubt the objective is greater rights for Albanians, whom most Macedonians regard as having enjoyed equal rights since independence. Although an agreement was signed between the Macedonian and Albanian political parties on August 13, 2001, tensions between the two ethnic groups remain high.

From the perspective of the Macedonian government, bringing an end to the NLA movement, by force if necessary, and reestablishing peace in Macedonia were the country's most immediate needs. After the July cease-fire, the Macedonian government participated in peace talks with Albanians on possible changes to the constitution and the creation of laws to prevent discrimination against ethnic Albanians. Though the ultimate agreement provides guarantees to the Albanian population, many Macedonians view the agreement negatively, and believe that Albanians were legally protected even before the fighting began.

Under the agreement, the Macedonian parliament is required to ratify the political reforms being extended to the Albanian population. To date, ratification has not occurred, and many of the proposed reforms remain contentious issues for ethnic Macedonian parliamentarians and citizens. There are also serious concerns that once the agreement is ratified, it will not be properly implemented by Macedonian authorities on the ground.

Albanian Perspectives

Most Macedonian Albanians were upset by the violence that erupted in February, and the Albanian political leadership in Macedonia has been careful to distance itself from the NLA's tactics. However, many remained sympathetic to the avowed goals of the NLA, which are identical to the goals of the main Albanian political parties: elimination of constitutional provisions favoring the Macedonian majority, increased presence of Albanians in the public administration, recognition of Albanian as a second official language, decentralization of governance, and public funding for the Albanian-language university in Tetovo.

Many Albanians in Macedonia feel like second class citizens, and they would like more access to jobs, education, and government institutions, as well as the use of Albanian symbols and the Albanian language. Albanians have pressed for these rights throughout the 1990s, and many believe that little progress has been made. The 1998 elections that brought to power a new Albanian-Macedonian coalition gave hope to many Albanians that positive changes would be made regarding their rights. Results before the outbreak of violence were real, but limited: increased Albanian representation in governing structures and a plan for an internationally supported but private university in Tetovo using Albanian as well as other languages.

Albanians believe the Macedonian government prefers not to deal with other major problems that exist for Albanians in Macedonia, including the fact that many have relatives from which they are cut off due to Macedonia's borders. Tens of thousands of ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia—some for decades—lack citizenship, while many Macedonians living abroad have it. In the midst of poor economic conditions, and with a weak civil society, whether Albanians ultimately embrace the NLA or stand by the Macedonian government will greatly effect the future nature of inter-ethnic relations.

Despite their concerns over their status within Macedonia, during the course of months of fighting the majority of Albanians have not joined the ranks of the NLA, or even declared their support for the guerillas. Many continue to identify with the stated goals of the NLA, however, and want to see Albanian rights in Macedonia improved. Most Albanians were also supportive of the peace talks with the Macedonian government, and are satisfied, if somewhat skeptical, with the agreement. For now, the majority of Albanians want to go on with their lives and live peacefully within the Macedonian state.

International Community Perspectives

The recent guerrilla movement in Macedonia has prompted a limited response by the international community. Expressing support for Macedonian sovereignty and territorial integrity, the United States and European Union introduced mediators to assist in reaching a political solution to the conflict. The United States and the European Union have encouraged the Macedonian government to adopt policies of restraint, and have stressed the importance of compromise and the creation of a dialogue between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian population. At international insistence, the Macedonian government has engaged in a serious discussion of the situation with Albanian political leaders, and participated in successful talks on extending and improving Albanian rights.

In July, NATO agreed, once a political solution was negotiated, to take part in a 30-day mission in Macedonia, during which time the Alliance would designate 15 weapons collection points in western and northern Macedonia. The force was led by the British and consisted of 4,500 troops. Under the signed peace agreement, NLA guerillas agreed to voluntarily give up their weapons and cease all violent activities. NATO's mission officially began the last week of August, and was marred almost immediately by the death of a British soldier, whose vehicle was allegedly attacked by a group of Macedonians. After this initial event, the mission proceeded almost without incident. By the end of September, ethnic Albanians turned in 3,300 weapons to NATO forces, and the NATO mission, known as Operation Essential Harvest, was completed on schedule.

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For the international community, the key questions are ensuring implementation of the political aspects of the agreement, and ensuring that NLA guerrillas and Macedonian security forces keep their commitments.

For Kosovo Albanians, the preeminent issue on the agenda is independence for Kosovo.

To ensure compliance with the agreement, as well as the safety of the 120 monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) who are overseeing its implementation, a reduced NATO force, numbering approximately 1,000, will remain in Macedonia. The new mission, Operation Amber Fox, will be led by Germany and will remain in the country for six to nine months.

Both Albanians and Macedonians have qualms with some of the concessions that were made, though Albanians are overall much happier with the agreement than are Macedonians. Under the agreement, Albanian will become a second official language in Macedonia, certain powers will be devolved to the municipalities, and the number of Albanians in the police force and public administration are to increase. As a result of these concessions, ethnic Albanians are obligated to recognize Macedonia's current borders and abandon ideas of partitioning the country along Albanian and Macedonian lines.

Policy Options

For the international community, the key questions are ensuring implementation of the political aspects of the agreement, and ensuring that NLA guerrillas and Macedonian security forces keep their commitments. Macedonian stalling of constitutional changes could elicit a violent Albanian response. A vigorous approach to border patrols and an aggressive effort to end arms supplies to any remaining extremist groups is therefore still important. So, too, is pressure on the Macedonians to fulfill their commitments.

If the negotiated solution does not hold, NATO faces difficult choices. It can try to stand aside while fighting continues, but its troops in Macedonia would clearly be at risk. Withdrawal of NATO from Macedonia would precipitate increased fighting. Maintenance of NATO in Macedonia in a non-permissive environment is something NATO governments want to avoid, but it may need to be considered if all else fails.

Kosovo: Independence or Sovereignty?

Albanian Perspectives

For Kosovo Albanians, the preeminent issue on the agenda is independence for Kosovo. They face opposition not only from the governments of Yugoslavia and Serbia, but also from the international community, which has supported the maintenance (at least for the time being) of Yugoslav sovereignty. Only Albania officially supports Kosovo independence. Additionally, due to restrictions put in place by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, the settlement of Kosovo's ultimate status will be tricky at best. Resolution 1244 both reaffirms the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the need for "substantial autonomy and meaningful self-administration for Kosovo." Resolution 1244 does not, however, set forth a framework through which the final status of Kosovo will be determined. The Rambouillet Accords, which were never accepted by the Yugoslav government, state that after three years, an international meeting will be convened to decide upon a mechanism for determining Kosovo's final status. Whether such a meeting will occur, and what it will result in, remains unclear.

While Kosovo remains a de facto international protectorate, the Albanian population wants the Yugoslav and Serbian governments to admit to atrocities committed during and prior to the 1999 conflict between NATO and Yugoslavia, conduct trials for those responsible, and extradite indictees to The Hague Tribunal. Kosovo Albanians have been largely successful at seeking the release of Albanian political prisoners held in Serbia, and are pressing for investigations of missing Albanians. These things are beginning to happen in Serbia, as the recent exhumations of Albanians buried in mass graves in Serbia

and trials of Yugoslav soldiers for atrocities committed in the 1999 conflict demonstrate.

Direct communication between the Yugoslav/Serbian authorities and the Kosovo Albanians on missing persons has been almost nonexistent. Albanians regard Serbian investigations as excruciatingly slow and suspect that many army and police force investigators were involved in atrocities since they are holdovers from the Milosevic regime.

Until recently, most Kosovo Albanians were reluctant to engage Serbs, even those associated with the new democratic regime, on issues of common interest. Kosovo Albanians regard President Kostunica and the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) as differing little from Milosevic in attitudes toward Kosovo and Albanians. Few high-level meetings between Yugoslav and Kosovo Albanian officials are publicly known to have taken place, and the tone of Albanian leaders toward the Belgrade government remains hostile.

Attitudes among the Albanians toward contacts with Serbia and Serbs are, however, changing. Many in Kosovo recognize that Kosovo's fate is inevitably intertwined with Serbia's, and that an independent Kosovo could not survive with Serbia as a hostile neighbor. In addition, proper handling of the identification of Albanian bodies found in Serbia will depend on cooperation between Serbs and Albanians. Unofficial contacts on a wide range of issues between leaders in both communities have begun and are likely to grow.

For Albanians, the November 17, 2001 Kosovo-wide elections represent an important opportunity for the Kosovo Serbs to demonstrate their good faith and interest in being reintegrated into Kosovo. If the Serbs do not vote, the Albanians will likely accept the appointment of parliamentary representatives, as they did for municipal officials after the October 2000 elections. If this occurs, it will be a severe setback for cooperation between Albanians and Serbs.

Yugoslav/Serb Perspectives

The Yugoslav government, while it accepts the international protectorate in Kosovo, seeks to maintain Serbian sovereignty over what it continues to regard as a Serbian province. Privately, Yugoslav and Serbian leaders accept the fact that Kosovo can never again be governed from Belgrade, but they continue to want to maintain the hope that Kosovo will be returned to Yugoslav sovereignty, at least nominally, when the international protectorate ends.

While content to see the international protectorate maintained indefinitely, Belgrade is concerned about the treatment of the minority Serb population still living in the province and highly critical of the failure of the UN Mission and NATO to protect the Kosovo Serbs. After the end of the 1999 NATO conflict, perhaps 200,000 Serbs and other minorities left or were forced out of Kosovo, or went missing. Those who remain live largely in enclaves, including Mitrovica, and the northern-most municipalities. These enclaves are isolated from each other, and travel between them requires NATO escorts. Improvement of these conditions is an important Yugoslav/Serbian objective. The Kosovo Serbs have tried to make their participation in local governance and Kosovo elections conditional on better protection.

Kosovo issues have important political resonance in Serbia. The DOS coalition fears that it may suffer political losses if Kosovo Serbs are not protected, or if the Yugoslav claim to sovereignty is weakened. DOS officials argue that independence for Kosovo could further destabilize Macedonia, inspiring separatist sentiment in its large Albanian population and providing nationalists in the Bosnian Republika Srpska (RS) entity with an example upon which claims to independence could be based.

At the same time, some in Serbia look to Bosnia as a model for Kosovo. In May, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic, head of the Yugoslav Coordinating Centre for Kosovo, proposed the creation of two entities, one Serb, one Albanian, within Kosovo. Each would be self-governing and both would be under Yugoslav sovereignty. According to Covic's plan, the Serb entity would include major monuments in Serb culture and history, as well as several northern municipalities, while the Albanian entity would include

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most of Kosovo's Albanian population. According to Covic, "Both sides should rid themselves of the illusion that the whole of Kosovo belongs to them. . . . Serbs and Albanians must understand that avoiding compromises forever will prolong the war in which both sides will be losers for sure."

International Community Perspectives

The international community has not supported independence for Kosovo, even during the NATO air campaign. This puts it in the difficult position of supporting the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, while recognizing that Yugoslavia cannot govern the Kosovo Albanians. Members of the international community share Serbia's concern that independence for Kosovo could harm the progress of Yugoslavia's democratic transition and generate a nationalist backlash. Albanian violence against Serbs and other minorities has strengthened those within the international community who oppose Kosovo independence. The notion that Albanians are adequately protected under the international protectorate has also reduced the urgency of a definitive resolution to Kosovo's political status.

The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has been partially successful. However, UNMIK was unable to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Serbs that occurred after the NATO air campaign even with over 40,000 troops in place. Additionally, UNMIK donor countries have been slow to provide funds, which has resulted in only limited implementation of democratic, judicial, and police reforms.

Policy Options

There are four basic options for Kosovo's status: (1) continuation of the international protectorate indefinitely; (2) a referendum by a date certain, followed almost certainly by independence; (3) a promise of future independence, provided certain conditions are met; and (4) partition or division.

Under option one, the international community could seek gradually to transfer governing authority to Kosovo's democratically elected institutions, but without settling the final status issue. Those who support this option believe the time will come when a solution will emerge. Those who oppose it believe Albanian aspirations for independence cannot be postponed indefinitely.

Option two, a referendum most likely followed by independence, was first discussed during the Rambouillet negotiations. It is seen by some as the most democratic way of determining Kosovo's future, as well as one of the few legitimate ways of breaking the link between Belgrade and Kosovo. Opponents of the referendum option cite the ethnic violence that has plagued Kosovo since 1999 as the chief reason why a referendum should not occur. They argue that if Kosovars vote for independence, as they are overwhelmingly expected to do, without an international presence to protect minorities, Kosovo is likely to quickly descend down a path of violence and crime.

Proponents of option three argue that when certain conditions (such as rule of law, respect for minority rights, and guarantees of territorial integrity throughout the region) have been met, independence can be responsibly granted to Kosovo by the international community. Others argue that even if these conditions are met, there is no way of knowing what will happen to minorities and democratic institutions once the international presence leaves Kosovo. Others argue that independence cannot be granted regardless of what conditions are met within Kosovo unless Belgrade agrees to a formal change of Serbian borders.

Option three has also been termed quasi- or conditional independence. The notion of conditional independence is most prominently described by the Independent International Commission on Kosovo, which recommended it in a report on the future status of Kosovo issued in October 2000. If agreed to by the governments of Yugoslavia, Kosovo, and the international community, conditional or quasi-independence would consist of

self-governance for Kosovo without actual independence. This solution would address the concern that outright independence might be destabilizing for the region, as well as the widely held position that Kosovo is not yet viable as an independent entity.

This arrangement would allow Kosovo to gradually move toward independence, while at the same time working to build better relations with its neighbors in the region. Over time, increased economic links, cooperation, integration, and safer borders would result. In approaching independence for Kosovo slowly and in a limited way, the governments of Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Bosnia would not be destabilized, as some believe they might be with a sudden grant of independence. This approach also has the benefit of not rewarding violence or separatism, because ultimate independence would be contingent upon responsible governance and the protection of human rights.

The conditional-independence solution could also be used to prevent the creation of a "Greater Kosovo," by placing restrictions on Kosovo's territorial ambitions as a precondition for outright independence. A "Greater Albania" is equally unlikely to be created because there is currently little connection between Albanians in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro, and Albanians in Albania. Though this may change as time goes on and more regional cooperation is generated, it is still unlikely that an enlarged Albanian state will emerge. Nonetheless, any settlement leading to eventual independence for Kosovo will need to contain a guarantee that Kosovo's leaders will not seek to annex the Albanian portions of Macedonia or Montenegro, and that unification with Albania will not occur.

Option four is perhaps the most contentious. Proponents of partition argue that Kosovo Serbs and Albanians simply do not want to live together, and should not be forced to. Rather than continuing bouts of ethnic cleansing on both sides, Kosovo Serbs in the northern municipalities should be governed by Belgrade, and Kosovo Albanians should be left to govern themselves. Opponents of partition argue that any type of division will never be clean, and that Albanians will be stuck in Serb areas, and Serbs in Albanian areas. It is also argued that the division of Bosnia into entities has hindered its democratic transition, and that the same could occur in a divided Kosovo. Furthermore, according to some, partition would set a bad example for the rest of the region, and would result in Serbs seeking to partition Bosnia, or Albanians seeking to partition Macedonia and the Presevo Valley.

Southern Serbia: A Model Solution?

Yugoslav/Serb Perspectives

Until this spring, Yugoslav armed forces and police faced a challenge from an Albanian guerrilla army known as the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja, or the UCPMB. The UCPMB operated in the "ground safety zone," a three-mile-wide buffer zone inside Serbia along the border with Kosovo, which was created when the Yugoslav forces withdrew from Kosovo in June 1999. The UCPMB was not fighting for equal rights for Albanians in Serbia, but explicitly to unite the ethnic Albanian villages of the Presevo Valley in southern Serbia with Kosovo.

The situation was peacefully resolved on May 21, 2001 when most of the key members of the UCPMB agreed to disband the army by the end of the month, and NATO gave Yugoslav armed forces permission to enter, in phases, the ground safety zone. The Yugoslav and Serb governments also granted amnesty to those who participated in the rebellion, as long as they gave up their arms and agreed to turn themselves in by May 24. A new, ethnically mixed police force is in the process of being created, and it will ultimately include 400 officers. Though controlled by the Serbian Interior Ministry, the new police force will be trained by the OSCE.

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attitudes in Belgrade have changed. They have also used the agreement to enhance cooperation with NATO and gain acceptance in alliance circles.

The Albanian Perspective

Many Albanians are apprehensive regarding Serbian plans to integrate the Albanian population into police and government institutions, and fear that once international interest in Presevo wanes, so will Serbian efforts to improve Albanian living conditions.

Most ethnic Albanians in the Presevo Valley, especially those not involved in the fighting, are relieved that the crisis is over. However, there remains suspicion of the Serbian authorities who negotiated the deal. Many Albanians are apprehensive regarding Serbian plans to integrate the Albanian population into police and government institutions, and fear that once international interest in Presevo wanes, so will Serbian efforts to improve Albanian living conditions. Albanians are even more concerned by the fact that many of the police officers and Ministry of the Interior troops involved in policing the demilitarized zone are the same individuals who patrolled the area under Milosevic, and in some circumstances committed crimes against the Albanian population.

Additionally, many Albanians feel that ethnic integration, the return of Albanians who fled from Kosovo, and the improvement of the economic situation are not occurring fast enough. They complain that there is no real mechanism for promised changes to occur, and no specific forum for them to air their concerns. Albanian unemployment remains high, and those former UCPMB members who recently turned in their weapons now find themselves with no jobs and few prospects to make a decent living. Whether this situation will incite a return to UCPMB violence remains uncertain, but recent reports of a resurgent UCPMB in southern Serbia are cause for concern.

A related issue that remains contentious for Albanians is recognition in Serbia of degrees conferred by the unofficial university in Kosovo run by Albanians during the Milosevic period and attended by Albanians from the Presevo Valley. The Serbian government continues to refuse to accept these degrees, primarily because the diplomas state that the degree was achieved in the Republic of Kosova. This irritates Albanians and hinders their ability to get jobs requiring university degrees, including promised jobs in the public administration.

International Community Perspectives

For the international community, the settlement of the situation in southern Serbia was seen as a victory for the new democratic government in Belgrade, and as a possible model for dealing with the Albanian guerrillas in Macedonia.

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The international community also saw the Presevo settlement as a means of discouraging Albanians throughout the region from using violence to achieve their goals. Southern Serbia NATO envoy Peter Feith stated that the resolution to the fighting "sends a strong signal to the region as a whole, especially to the Albanian community in and around Kosovo, that armed violence has no future, and that it is best to pursue their political aspirations through political means."

While progress has been made between Belgrade and the Albanians in the Presevo Valley, the situation is not completely resolved. The new leadership in Belgrade seems to have learned from the mistakes made by the Milosevic government regarding Kosovo, and has thus far handled the situation well. Belgrade has begun the process of integrating the Albanians into police forces and other institutions in the region. However, this process is far from complete, and must continue if relations are to truly improve between Serbs and Albanians in the area.

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Policy Options

Currently, the international community has two policy options in regard to the settlement in southern Serbia. The first option is to remain relatively uninvolved in the implementation of the agreement, and let Serbian and Albanian authorities work it out themselves. A second option calls for intense international involvement in overseeing the implementation of the May agreement. By doing this, the international community could better assure that Serbs or Albanians, facing unemployment and poverty, would not turn to violence as a means of resolving their grievances.

As the situation stands, both Albanians and Serbs in the Presevo Valley feel that NATO and the international community have abandoned them, largely as a result of intensified international interest in the Macedonian conflict. Both Serbs and Albanians feel that continued NATO engagement would provide stability while integration occurs in southern Serbia, as well as a sense of security that no other guerrilla groups will decide to take up arms and destroy the fragile peace that now exists. On a practical level, increased international attention to the implementation of reforms in southern Serbia now might prevent a more serious conflict later.

Montenegro: Bulwark of Stability?

Albanian Perspectives

Since the late 1990s and the rise of Milo Djukanovic, Montenegro has successfully managed to integrate its Albanian minority into its political system. However, Albanians in Montenegro still have concerns, many of which are similar to those of other Albanians in the region. Many feel that they are underrepresented in government offices and public administration bodies, and that electoral promises are not always fulfilled once a ruling coalition comes into power. Nevertheless, Albanians acknowledge that efforts to deal with these concerns through further integration of the Albanian population into Montenegrin society and the government have been largely successful. Albanian support for Montenegrin independence reflects in part confidence in Montenegro's leadership and institutions.

Montenegrin Perspectives

The integration of Albanians into the political system has been done through a number of mechanisms, but primarily through Montenegro's constitution. The Montenegrin constitution focuses more on civil and human rights than do others in the region, which has allowed the government to create organizations to monitor minority rights. One such organization is the recently created Ministry for the Protection of the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic and National Minorities, which is headed by an Albanian. Other guarantees include a constitutional provision that requires five parliamentary seats to be reserved for ethnic Albanians.

Additionally, the Montenegrin government has consistently pursued policies designed to prevent ethnic violence from erupting, and has gone out of its way to assist Albanians in the region, especially during the war in Kosovo in 1999. Serbian nationalist campaigning in the last parliamentary elections was, however, a reminder that ethnic tensions could be ignited in Montenegro if the opposition comes to power.

International Community Perspectives

The international community has been less concerned with the lot of Albanians in Montenegro than with Montenegro's drive for independence. Some believe Montenegrin

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independence would raise a new Albanian issue in the Balkans, because it would encourage Albanian aspirations to join Kosovo. Others believe—with more reason—that Albanian support for independence reflects real satisfaction with the Djukanovic government and doubts about remaining in Yugoslavia. Support for Yugoslavia and opposition to independence aligns the international community with Serb nationalists and anti-reform forces in Belgrade and Podgorica.

Policy Options

While Montenegro is not perfect, it illustrates that in the Balkans, Western-style democracy can accommodate a substantial ethnic minority in a way that allows sovereignty and territorial integrity to be respected.

It is clear that if anti-independence forces led by pro-Yugoslavia Serb nationalists come to power in Montenegro there will be serious problems in the Albanian community. If Montenegro decides in favor of independence, it is unlikely that its policies toward Albanians and other minorities will change. The international community needs to recognize the steps Montenegro has taken to protect its Albanian minority and encourage the government to do more of the same. Recognition of independence should depend on guarantees of respect for minority rights.

While Montenegro is not perfect, it illustrates that in the Balkans, Western-style democracy can accommodate a substantial ethnic minority in a way that allows sovereignty and territorial integrity to be respected. Montenegro's success also shows that ethnic diversity need not be an obstacle to a strong democratic state, but rather that it can serve as an asset.

Albania: Part of the Solution?

Albania is seen by some in the Balkans as the “mother country” that will one day unite all Albanians in the region.

Albania has had a difficult transition from a closed, communist society to an open, democratic one. These difficulties have involved political assassinations, the breakdown of law and order, and a virtual security and economic collapse in 1997. Albania's internal problems have made it difficult for Albania to support a pan-Albanian movement or better treatment for Albanian minorities in other Balkan countries. Still, Albania is seen by some in the Balkans as the “mother country” that will one day unite all Albanians in the region. This has caused countries in the region with substantial Albanian minorities to view Albania with distrust, especially concerning its ultimate territorial aspirations and the flow of arms from Albania that can reach Albanians throughout the Balkans.

From the inception of the most recent crises in Presevo and Macedonia, the Albanian government has been unwilling to support the goals of insurgents in either area. President Rexhep Meidani has criticized the violence in Macedonia, and stated that Macedonian stability is absolutely necessary for regional stability. Similarly, Prime Minister Ilir Meta has reiterated that Albania does not support any border changes in the Presevo Valley, nor the actions of the insurgents in the region.

Within the international community, Albania is increasingly seen as a country that is concerned for Albanian minorities, but not willing to risk regional instability by supporting radical Albanian elements.

As it becomes more stable and prosperous, Albania will become more influential in the Balkans, especially on matters relating to the treatment of Albanians. Some Albanians already see Albania as a source of support and protection. Within the international community, Albania is increasingly seen as a country that is concerned for Albanian minorities, but not willing to risk regional instability by supporting radical Albanian elements.

The Albanian government deserves to be applauded for the responsible positions it has taken on the recent violence, and Albania should continue to encourage ethnic Albanians in the Balkans not to use force as a means of resolving their grievances. Because Albania occupies a special position on Albanian issues in the Balkans, it must continue to steer such conflicts toward peaceful resolutions that are fair to all involved. Fortunately, this seems to be widely recognized within the Albanian government.

Policy Options

Albania's relationship with Albanians who live in neighboring countries and with the governments of those countries will be critical to stability in the region. Many Albanians throughout the Balkans would like to see much freer movement and exchange among their communities in Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia. However, the only way to achieve more liberal border regimes is through confidence and trust. Macedonia and Yugoslavia will not allow this to occur if they believe it will be used to undermine the integrity of their states. Regaining freedom of movement for ordinary citizens will also require an end to freedom of movement for insurgents or smugglers. Albania can do a great deal to end trafficking of this sort.

Albania can also contribute by continuing to build a viable state and a strong democracy within its borders. Albanians in Albania can act as models for Albanians wherever they live, and at the same time encourage them to live their lives as citizens of other countries.

Conclusions

Ten years of war and ethnic conflict in the Balkans have left the region far behind the rest of Central and Eastern Europe in the transition to democracy and free market economies. Albanians, along with others in the region, will benefit if the relatively new and democratic governments in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania can find their way toward establishing the rule of law, opening trade and investment flows, increasing freedom of movement, and fighting organized crime and corruption. For the first time, almost all of the governments in the Balkans are democratically elected and are voicing their desire to end, once and for all, the conflicts that began in the early 1990s. The current situation provides unique opportunities for all the governments in the region to work together on an unprecedented scale.

Nationalist extremism among a relative few is now the major security threat to the region. Albanians, mistreated by the Milosevic regime in Serbia and discouraged by the lack of progress in Macedonia, have not been immune to extremist appeals. Crime and corruption have helped to fuel nationalist violence, among Albanians as it did previously among other ethnic groups.

Stability in the Balkans has become a long-term mission for NATO and the EU. Only by offering the prospect of close association with European and trans-Atlantic institutions can the international community hope to create the right incentives in the Balkans. And only in a region that finds its proper place in Europe can the Albanian question at long last be resolved.

Albanians, along with others in the region, will benefit if the relatively new and democratic governments in Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania can find their way toward establishing the rule of law, opening trade and investment flows, increasing freedom of movement, and fighting organized crime and corruption.

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