

Kosovo – ‘a ticking bomb’

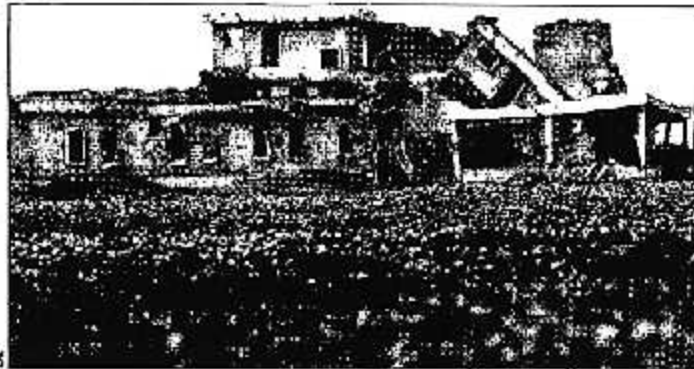
COMMENTARY
BY ARISTOTLE TZIAMPIRIS*

Kosovo today resembles a ticking bomb that has the potential to destabilize the western Balkans. While the international community continues to do business as usual with no real sense of urgency or new and imaginative proposals, a worrisome and explosive situation is fast emerging.

The ethnic violence of March 17-18 will probably prove to be not the culmination of frustrations and animosity but a warning of much worse to come. This article is not an exercise in scaremongering, nor does it suggest that a return to large-scale warfare (as in the 1990s) is possible today in the Balkans. Nevertheless, a feeling of pessimism over future developments is becoming inescapable.

The significance of Kosovo cannot be underestimated. What happens there will influence the domestic, constitutional and regional politics of Serbia-Montenegro, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the same time, the credibility of the United Nations and (to a lesser extent) of the European Union is also at stake. Unfortunately, international developments linked to the war against terrorism guarantee that attention and funds will mostly be focused on other regions, especially in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Perhaps the biggest failure in Kosovo is on the economic front. The economy is in tatters, for a population of some 1.76 million, per capita income is about 700 euros. GDP estimates vary, but a recent UN report gives the figure at just 1.34 billion euros. Unemployment is massive. The European Stability Initiative, a research and policy institute with offices in Berlin and Lisbon, concluded that 32 percent of Kosovars are



An ethnic Albanian boy runs in a grassy meadow in front of an old broadcasting station – destroyed during the 1999 NATO-led bombing campaign – in the village of Komoran in Kosovo last month.

without jobs, but of those employed, a staggering 42.8 percent are involved in subsistence agriculture. A picture of rural underdevelopment also emerges. According to the 2003 Kosovo Green Book – which forms the basis for the province's agricultural strategy and policy – 80 percent of all farms cover between 0.5 and 2 hectares, and hence are too small to be efficient or really productive. The countryside is heavily overpopulated, but for many reasons (mostly connected to the EU), it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to emigrate (unlike the past 50 years). Remittances from relatives abroad are crucial for survival, but recent evidence suggests that they are levelling off and might even soon decrease. Imports are at 988.7 million euros but exports stand at an incredibly low level of 27.32 million euros. Furthermore, some 50,000 young people enter unemployment rolls every year, with no reasonable prospects for a more prosperous future. Underneath, this combination of poverty and unemployment contributes to mass dissatisfaction and thus to protests and violence.

Widespread ethnic tensions, economic stagnation and political in-

stability discourage the international business community from investing in Kosovo. At the same time, Kosovo's unclear constitutional status makes it almost impossible for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to issue much-needed loans, the reason being, of course, that such institutions deal with states and not with entities.

The failure of the UN's Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is thus becoming clear, but it is an honorable (not a miserable) failure. After all, UNMIK is not a developmental agency and, together with KFOR, it has managed to retain peace and order, the worst for some five years. Nevertheless, it is evident to all impartial observers that more tasks have to be delegated to local authorities, even though this act does not ensure that they will be performed in a more efficient manner. The reduction of UNMIK's satisfactory performance is additionally troubling (and a politically sensitive topic) given recent efforts to get the UN to assume a much larger role in the administration of Iraq. At the very least, important lessons from Kosovo ought to be taken into account before a new UN mandate is

decided and implemented.

Ultimately, the question of Kosovo's final status will have to be addressed. Despite much rhetoric, there is really no doubt that Kosovo will become an independent state. The only questions (all weighty) are when, how and at what cost for the region? At this point, the international community must make it absolutely clear that partition and its more sophisticated ‘twinning proposal’ – that of an exchange of territories between Kosovo and Serbia – are off the table. Both would constitute the opening of a Pandora's box for the western Balkans. If the message is sent out that agitation, violence and making UN administrative arrangements unworkable can lead to the redrawing of borders, then a much wider crisis will have to be faced: the effective destabilization of Bosnia-Herzegovina and possibly FYROM.

At the same time, Kosovo's final status should not lead to feelings of bitterness and rearmament for the Serbian side. If the final agreement is judged unfair by the populace at large, it will strengthen the forces of extreme nationalism and keep Serbia away from its path toward join-

ing Euro-Atlantic institutions.

My proposal would be that Kosovo's final status be decided when the Union of Serbia and Montenegro is reviewed again, possibly leading to a smooth divorce. Kosovo ought to maintain its present borders but be governed on the basis of the principle of decentralization (not among ethnic lines though). Security guarantees must be provided for the Serbs and other minorities. The EU should assume a larger role, providing more financial assistance and perhaps establishing a police force on the basis of the EYROM and forthcoming Bosnian models. Furthermore, Kosovo's path toward joining the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) should be accelerated. At the same time, Serbia must not be forgotten and should receive (in addition to the guarantees for its minority) an important package that will assist reform efforts. It could consist of considerable monetary aid (at least \$1 billion), a deal to join Partnership for Peace (PfP) arrangements (assuming war crimes suspect General Radko Mladic has been arrested by them), as well as an SAP agreement or a clear road map of how to get there in a timely fashion.

For the time being though, a real political settlement on the Kosovo question that actually contributes to regional security and accelerates economic reforms seems a much distant prospect. Unfortunately, democracies tend to be at their best in reacting to crises. Rarely do they function proactively with great success. Another crisis on the ground would certainly concentrate the minds of the international decision-making community, but let us all hope that this will not be the case – again.

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