Meyer on the Kosovo Deadline

Steven E. Meyer, a visiting research Fellow at the Center for Public Justice this year and a professor at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., published a timely and controversial article on the future of Kosovo in National Interest online (9/5/07) that outlines six realities that Kosovo and Serbia must not ignore. Meyer concludes with four pointers to a way out of the current diplomatic deadlock. You can access the article at: http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=15444. What lies behind Meyer’s article?

After the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Serbia, the question of the Serbian province of Kosovo has remained the most difficult unresolved situation. Kosovo borders Albania and 90 percent of its population is Albanian, only 10 percent Serb. Kosovo wants independence from Serbia, whereas Serbia considers Kosovo an inalienable part of its territory.

In 1999, NATO troops fought to defend Kosovo from ethnic cleansing by Slobodan Milosevic’s Serb forces. Those forces were driven back and since that time Kosovo has been under the temporary rule of the United Nations. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the Serbia-Kosovo conflict now seem to have reached a dead end, however, due to serious disagreement between Russia and key European governments (and the Americans) over a plan put forward by the UN’s special envoy for Kosovo, Martti Ahtisaari. The Ahtisaari Plan calls for the UN to recognize Kosovo’s independence under UN supervision, but Russia, standing by Serbia, has rejected the proposal.

Today’s mounting tension over Kosovo’s future is due in part to the fact that a diplomatic resolution is supposed to be reached by December 10. But no progress in talks is now being made and that heightens the threat of violence after December 10. It would be bad enough if the Kosovo dilemma involved only Serbia and its independence-seeking province. But it does not. Europeans and Russians all know that the future of the Western Balkans as well as that of certain other minority groups
throughout Europe and Russia is at stake. If Kosovo is allowed to become independent, what might that do to inspire independence movements of minorities in other Balkan countries, the Basques in Spain, or minorities in the southern Russia?

This is the situation that Meyer addresses in his article. He argues that the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo must face up to six realities. The first is that “the Ahtisaari Plan is dead. . . . Events have moved well beyond Ahtisaari’s proposal to create a series of ethnically stove-piped communities in Kosovo.”

The second reality, writes Meyer, is that “U.S. influence has diminished” and it would be a mistake for the Americans to try to take any independent action, such as recognizing Kosovo’s independence, apart from a wider agreement among the negotiating parties.

In the third place, if Belgrade (Serbia’s capital) and Pristina (Kosovo’s capital) remain “locked in a nasty, dangerous zero-sum game,” there will almost certainly be violence in the end. Reality number four, says Meyer, is that “multi-ethnicity is dead in Kosovo.” The fact is that “most Serbs and Albanians do not want to live together in the same society or to be governed by a government controlled by the other ethnic group.”

The fifth reality that must not be ignored is that “a surge of new violence in and around Kosovo likely will lead to renewed outside military intervention.” Although such intervention might successfully keep Serbs and Albanian Kosovars from civil war, it would very likely “set back efforts to find a permanent political and security solution.” And finally, “the Kosovo issue,” argues Meyer, “is primarily about ethnic, territorial sovereignty.” State sovereignty for the nations of northern Europe, which have led in the development of the European Union, may be less of an issue today. “But the Western Balkans is in a different place.”

If those six realities are unavoidable, then what must be done? Meyer’s four pointers to a positive outcome are the following. “First, both sides need to accept the fact that a negotiated partition, with attendant border adjustments, can provide the basis for an equitable—not perfect—division of territory.” However, secondly, “partition and border changes alone will not be enough.” Since there are small pockets of Serbs in Kosovo and of Albanians in Serbia and since there are some important Serbian holy and historic sites in Kosovo, any settlement must guarantee the safety of the minorities in each area and guarantee safe Serb access to the sites.

Third, a settlement of the Kosovo matter must “go even further to consider a broader realignment in the Western Balkans,” particularly the status of the Republicka Srpska, which does not want to be part of Bosnia. And finally, “once the political and security underpinnings of an agreement have been reached, negotiations should begin immediately between Belgrade and Pristina on economic cooperation.”

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