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## **Old Serbia or Kosovo Proper: Examining National Liberation in the Balkan Peninsula**

Mary Kate Schneider

State and national boundaries in the Balkan Peninsula of southeastern Europe have been shifting for hundreds of years, albeit not necessarily in concordance with one another. This disparity between state and national boundaries has produced a deeply-rooted nationalist conflict. Divisions between religious and ethnic groups are sharp, and the jagged edges of centuries-old feuds remain relevant today. Kosovo, a small province in southern Serbia sharing borders with Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), and newly independent Montenegro, is the Balkans' oldest and latest staging ground for nationalist mobilization. In many ways it is the crux of a people's national identity, thereby intensifying its inclination toward bitter and impassioned conflict. Perhaps most importantly, Kosovo is poised to become Europe's next epicenter of national liberation. The circumstances leading up to and surrounding this conflict can be explained in terms of two theories of nationalism: the rational actor assumption, and the principle of self-determination.

### **Kosovo: A Brief Overview**

On the surface, it would appear that disputes over Kosovo and other areas in the Balkans are so ingrained that they are almost tribally rooted, and therefore are an inborn

trait inherent to the regional population. Historical context, however, offers justification for these agendas.

Kosovo is not prized for economic benefits, and it is not fought over for its natural resources or geographic location. The Serbs hold Kosovo dear because Kosovo is where they were met and defeated by the Turkish imperialists who would rule oppressively for six centuries.

Although the province today is predominantly populated by ethnic Albanians (Kosovar Albanians), it remains an autonomous province under greater Serbia (it has also been administered by the United Nations since 1999). Its minority population consists of pockets of Serbs, Turks, and Bosniaks. For the purposes of this discussion, it should be noted that there are two distinct groups of Serbs that play an important role; unless otherwise noted, “the Serbs,” and “Serbians” refer to Serbs living in modern Serbia, and “Kosovar Serbs” refer to a minority group of Kosovars who can claim Serbian ethnicity.

The two primary parties engaged in the territorial dispute over Kosovo are the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians, a dichotomy that can be defined not only ethnically but also religiously and linguistically. The vast majority of Serbs are Eastern Orthodox, while an equally vast majority of Kosovars are Muslims, converted by the Ottoman Turks beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The historical relationship between the Turks and Serbs is profound, marked by nearly 600 years of Turkish dominance over the Serbs following the fateful June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1389 Battle of Kosovo, when the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović was killed by the invading Turks on the Plain of Kosovo (Kosovo Polje, meaning “Field of Blackbirds”<sup>105</sup>). The outcome

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<sup>105</sup> Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1943), 835.

of this battle effectively preserved the prince as a martyr for the defeated Serbian people and transferred Old Serbia in its entirety (including Kosovo) under the domain of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire maintained control throughout the Balkans until the Balkan Wars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Balkan League would drive the Turks out of Kosovo during the First Balkan War of 1912.

Prior to the Battle of Kosovo, the territory was simply called Old Serbia. Its inhabitants were predominantly Christian and ethnically Serbian. After the Turks dominated Old Serbia, mass exodus on the part of the Serbs left villages and homes devoid of residents. Albanians migrated into Kosovo to fill the absence left by the original Serbs (Serbs claim that the Albanians have been attempting to “outbreed” them<sup>106</sup>). This influx of Albanians was soon converted to Islam by the Turks and began to repopulate the region. This population shift has resulted in both parties claiming that they are the legitimate inhabitants of Kosovo, as the Serbs can claim to have occupied the region for most of history, while the Kosovar Albanians make the argument that Kosovo was abandoned by the Serbs.

### **Recent Episodes of Nationalist Conflict in Kosovo**

The Kosovar conflict reached a boiling point in the 1990s after the post-Cold War break-up of Yugoslavia. As the most egregious offenses of the Balkan Wars had taken place in Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia between 1992 and 1993, the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995 lulled the world into a false sense of security within the region. Meanwhile, nationalists in Serbia and Kosovo continued to run rampant,

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<sup>106</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 34.

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fueled by the fire that surrounded them, both literally and figuratively. The overworked Serbian war machine had nearly been bled dry, and paired with the Western world's stringent economic sanctions, the culmination of these factors led to a sharp and painful spike in unemployment and inflation in Serbia.<sup>107</sup> Similar to the domestic circumstances of the ill-fated Weimar Republic, the Serb populace viewed itself as very much the victims of the situation, and this feeling of victimization served to catalyze the already-flowing undercurrents of nationalism.

The same perceived victimization permeated the collective mentality of Kosovar Albanians, as they felt largely ignored and excluded from the Dayton Accords. While Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic was skillful in manipulating his constituency's defeated psyche through the use of nationalist propaganda, Albanians were capitalizing on their own feelings of abandonment by the West, which led to the creation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The goals of the KLA were not limited strictly to the Kosovo province; rather, they included the ultimate goal of unification among Albanian peoples in Kosovo, FYROM, and Albania. The KLA was easily portrayed by Serbian elites to the international community as a terrorist organization, which only served to reinforce the Serbian nationalist identity.

Tensions simmered in Serbia and Kosovo through 1998, marked by mutual atrocities. Serbian aggression mounted steadily, evolving into full-scale state military assaults that vastly outweighed the KLA's grassroots and guerilla efforts. Conflict escalated so much so that Kosovo finally attracted the attention of the Western world. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1999, the North

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<sup>107</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 444.

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched a bombing campaign on Serbia. Milosevic surrendered on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1999, soon after NATO introduced its Kosovo Protection Force (KFOR) peacekeeping mission. Concurrently, the United Nations mandated its United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), a peacekeeping mission that continues to operate within the province to date.

### **Theories of Nationalism:**

#### **Micro- and Macro-Level Perspectives**

On the micro-level of analysis, consider the basic assumption that nationalists are rational actors; that is, that they act in accordance with their own self-interest. There are some problems with this assumption, as basic rational actor theory stipulates that the individual's self-interest trumps any collective interests<sup>108</sup>—therefore, nationalist behavior by definition would be irrational, because it places the collective interest of the group above any individual motives. However, as Russell Hardin contends, rational action is an inherently subjective notion that cannot be universally defined, and actors act rationally if they do what they believe serves their interest.<sup>109</sup> This suggests that the validity of this theory relies on some agreement as to what, exactly, can be considered the national actor's self interest. On this note, Hardin suggests that, "The rational choice of ethnic, nationalist, or other group loyalty will be compelling if (1) *it often happens that self-interest and group identification are congruent* and if (2) actions that are

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<sup>108</sup> Russell Hardin offers a very cursory overview of this concept. See also literature concerning collective action and individual self-interest, particularly Mancur Olson, Thomas Schelling, Armen Alchian and Harold Demsetz, et al.

<sup>109</sup> Russell Hardin, "Self-interest, group identity" in Albert Breton, et al., eds., *Nationalism and Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

costly to the individual but beneficial to the group or nation are increasingly less likely the higher the individual costs.”<sup>110</sup>

At the macro-level, understand that most instances of nationalist conflict involve to some extent the modern state, either as an oppressor or representative of a nation. The modern state is in itself a legal concept more than it is any tangible thing, and its continued existence relies on the international community’s willingness to abide by international law and normative customs (norms). But beyond merely establishing the existence of the modern state as a technical term, it is necessary to consider the concept of self-determination. As a general principle of international law, self-determination can be defined as: “...the right of a people living in a territory to determine the political and legal status of that territory—for example, by setting up a state of their own or choosing to become part of another state.”<sup>111</sup> Thus, analyses of self-determination as well as the modern state go hand in hand. Still, the details surrounding self-determination have yet to be agreed upon, and so there are numerous ambiguities that need clarification. Who has a right to self-determination, and why? Does self-determination rest in parallel with the state? If so, are stateless nations denied the right to self-determination?

Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations addresses the issue of nations and self-determination, stating that one of the fundamental purposes of the international organization is to: “...develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 15 (*italics original*).

<sup>111</sup> Peter Malanczuk, *Akehurst’s Modern Introduction to International Law* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 326.

of peoples..."<sup>112</sup> Interpreted literally, it would appear that international law, or at the very least international norms, requires that self-determination not be restricted to states whose sovereignty has the benefit of legal recognition. This quickly poses a problem, because once something becomes a universal entitlement, it becomes very difficult to delineate where one nation's right to self-determination begins and another nation's ends. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, U.S. Senator, U.N. Ambassador, and sociologist, somewhat sarcastically criticizes universal self-determination when he says that, "...the tribes would demand self-determination. *It was, after all, their right*, enshrined in the United Nations Charter."<sup>113</sup>

### **Theories of Nationalism and Kosovo**

Applications of the theory of nationalist rational self-interest in Kosovo are ambiguous, in that self-interest is subjectively defined. According to the realist theory of international relations, the primary interest of the state is the security of the state. At both the individual or nationalist level, this means that the security (preservation) of the individual or nation is the primary interest of individuals and nations. The self-interested Kosovar Albanian is rational when he acts in such a manner as to preserve the Kosovar nation, and this is sufficient justification for nationalist movements such as the KLA to exist and operate. The ambiguity lies in the fact that just as the Kosovar Albanian's self-interest is subjectively defined, so too is the self-interest of the Serbs. The Serbs are equally motivated by their own national self-preservation as are the Kosovars, so while it is possible for

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<sup>112</sup> *Charter of the United Nations*, available at:  
<http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter>

<sup>113</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Pandaemonium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 66 (emphasis added).

both parties to be acting rationally at all times, it is not possible to escape the stalemate between Serbian and Kosovar Albanian nationalist motivations that occurs through the application of this theory.

However, to characterize the conflict in the Balkans as inescapable is to deny the situation's essential human component—Robert Kaplan calls this effect “dehumanizing.”<sup>114</sup> Therefore, because the motivations of Kosovar and opposing Serb nationalists can be explained in terms of serving their individual rational self-interest, it would be fallacious to assume that the fault line dividing Kosovars and Serbs is ineffaceable. It is possible that nationalist differences can be reduced to micro-level security dilemmas; the only distinction is that rather than requiring states to play the key actors, they involve people. The trick is, then, to strike a more fine-tuned balance of power. In this vein, Barry Posen discusses the “disappearance” of sovereigns, mentioning Yugoslavia in particular.<sup>115</sup> The absence of sovereigns implies anarchy, and a state of anarchy both instigates and perpetuates the security dilemma. The role of anarchy applies to states as well as nations, as both entities can be threatened out of existence by a more powerful state or nation. However, because the balance of power between nations often involves different kinds of variables than the balance of power among states (for example, nations must account for their psychological make-up in addition to their defense capabilities), more focused effort is required to establish and maintain balance.

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<sup>114</sup> Kaplan, “Why the Balkans Demand Amoralism.” *The Washington Post* (February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1999) in Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, xx.

<sup>115</sup> Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35:1 (1993), 28.

The other side of rational self-interest as it relates to nationalism raises the question: at what point does the interest of the group overwhelm the self-interest of the individual? Hardin relates a scenario in which a Croatian during the Bosnian wars says, "I really don't hate Muslims—but because of the situation, I want to kill them all."<sup>116</sup> Here, the Croatian was forced to deny his initial self-interest, which was to wait out the war without getting directly involved, in favor of his secondary self-interest, which is to maintain his insider position within the community. The Croatian's group membership protected him from being targeted but instead required him to sacrifice some element of his self-interest.

In light of the possibility that the interest of the group can override individual self-interest, Samantha Power's analysis of ground-level activity in Serbia during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign is insightful: "Serb units began to mutiny and to desert. They did not want to die for Kosovo, and they certainly did not want to die for Milosevic."<sup>117</sup> This shift in loyalties hints at the lack of individual-level nationalist commitment held by the Serbs in 1999, and the fact that their supposed individual self-interest is so susceptible to external elements asks the question of whether or not this theory is well-suited to explaining nationalist motivations surrounding Kosovo.

Taking a step back from individual rationality, consider the larger question of self-determination as it applies to Kosovo. Although its legal position is that of an autonomous province under the dominion of Serbia proper, Kosovo is presently administered by the United Nations under UNMIK, and has been since 1999. Kosovar Albanians, of whom

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<sup>116</sup> Hardin, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Power, 459.

approximately 90% of the population of Kosovo is comprised<sup>118</sup>, have indicated through numerous outlets that they would prefer to sever their connection to Serbia. Considering the fact that the physical territory is already occupied and governed by non-Serbs, it seems logical that Kosovo should be granted *de jure* sovereignty and the permission to act as a self-governing state, since much of this is already fulfilled on a *de facto* basis. However, if Kosovo does indeed have a right to self-determination, that right infringes on Serbia's equal right to self-determination. Both nations have laid claim to the land. If the assumption is that the right to self-determination is truly universal, it should follow that few nations will ever enjoy self-determination to the fullest possible extent, because one nation's rights will always overlap another's.

Other considerations for self-determination in Kosovo include a potential independence referendum. It is difficult to determine who should have the right to participate in such a referendum, because its implications are so widespread. As Kosovar Serbs and other ethnic groups within Kosovo are outnumbered roughly 9 to 1 by Kosovar Albanians, the likely outcome of a referendum that only permits citizens of Kosovo to vote should be fairly obvious. But if Serbia's historical claim to Kosovo is legitimate, should not Serbs have the right to vote as well? If that were the case, then pro-independence Kosovar Albanians would be severely outnumbered, and again, the outcome of the referendum should be obvious.

### **Evaluations and Inferences**

Although nationalist divisions within the Balkan region have existed throughout history, the fact that they continue to

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<sup>118</sup> Power, 445.

exist today is significant, and highlights the possibility that nationalist identities may burn more brightly than any other allegiances.

Particularly pressing issues are the possibility of an independence referendum in the near future<sup>119</sup>, and the effect that that might have on the accession of Serbia proper and/or the newly-created Kosovar state to the European Union (EU). It is ironic to note that there appears to be a paradoxical outcome to this situation: for Serbia to join the EU, it is expected that Serbia will resolve the conflict over Kosovo. However, by drawing such attention to the conflict, Serbs and Kosovars alike are doing the political equivalent of rubbing salt in each other's ancient wounds, constantly reminding themselves of both parties' offenses. This, in turn, will exacerbate the nationalist movements, Serbia has the option to willfully rescind its claim over Kosovo and acknowledge the Kosovar Albanians' right to self-determination, thereby serving the Serbian self-interest of increased likelihood of accession to the EU. Should Serbia choose this option, it must make a concerted, genuine effort to contain grassroots-level Serb nationalist violence against Kosovars. This represents the sacrifice of one Serbian interest in favor of another; for it to be successful, the Serbian government's preference of EU membership over possession of Kosovo must be accepted by the Serb people.

Serbia's alternative option is to maintain its interest in controlling Kosovo above and beyond all other preferences. Again, for this to be nationally supported (which it must be, for it to be successful, given the propensity for violence), the

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<sup>119</sup> Joachim Rucker, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General, has urged a swift resolution of Kosovo's status, preferably sooner than the January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007 general elections scheduled to take place in Serbia (Source: UNMIK News, <http://www.unmikonline.org/news.htm#1312>).

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Serbian government must convince the Serb people that it is in their rational self-interest to maintain Kosovo. As the Serbs have previously demonstrated an unwillingness to die for Kosovo, it is not likely that this will survive as a long-term Serbian policy. Additionally, the Serbs cannot maintain more than one primary interest, and it is not probable that Serbia will reverse on its attempts to gain EU membership. It appears that the Kosovars are the ones who can afford to sit and wait things out, as it is popularly understood that Serbia will be forced to recognize the new Kosovo's territorial identity as the cost of joining the EU.<sup>120</sup> The likelihood of a successful independence referendum is high, especially when considered in light of Montenegro's recent bid for independence.

The Albanian Kosovars' drive toward self-determination has proven more adept at providing stronger nationalist cohesion than Serbian self-interest. During the 1999 NATO strikes, Serbs took the opportunity to retaliate against Albanian Kosovars, relentlessly massacring and burning villages to the ground for nearly three months. However, as Serbs in Serbia grew weary of the battle and began to defect under Milosevic, Albanian Kosovars maintained the integrity of their movement and did not waver from their cause. Rather, hard as it was to see Kosovo as victorious when the price ha[d] been entire families [of Kosovar Albanians], the Kosovar Albanian survivors treated these sacrifices as the price of freedom.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> "A Province Prepares to Depart," *The Economist* (November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006)

<sup>121</sup> Power, 460.

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