Balkan Deep Freeze
What the right Kosovo precedent might look like.


BY IVAN KRASTEV

In the Balkans, they’re partying like it’s 1999. After a long respite, when the region dropped off the front pages, big and small players are facing off over Kosovo, whose future is up for grabs.

In recent weeks, ahead of mediator Martti Ahtisaari’s unveiling of his grand strategy today, fresh tensions have characterized the discussions over the status of the predominantly Albanian region, governed by the United Nations since the 1999 NATO bombing campaign and nominally claimed by Serbia. Russia moved from a position of constructive ambiguity to one of destructive clarity, with President Vladimir Putin repeatedly stating that Moscow won’t accept any solution deemed unacceptable by Belgrade. For its part, Belgrade repeated yesterday its opposition to any plan that puts Kosovo on a path toward independence, as the Ahtisaari one appears to, albeit in a farther off future than initially proposed. Meanwhile, Kosovars are determined that they can’t live with an anything-but-independence option.

The only U.N. Security Council resolution that will not be vetoed by Russia is the one without any mention of the i-word or any means for getting to independence. So, after months of backroom dealings and frustrated negotiations with Kosovars and Serbs at the table, the new future Kosovo put forward by the U.N. mediator and former Finnish president can be best described as an “independent protectorate of the European Union.”

The turn of the events is a political shock for the Albanian majority in Kosovo. Confident that the West would hand them independence, they were already popping open champagne bottles; now, the best Pristina can hope for is to declare it unilaterally and hope Western powers will in due course recognize this new Balkan country. At the same time, the EU’s decision to allow more negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, even after Mr. Ahtisaari presents his plan today, is a vindication of the uncompromising approach of Serbia’s outgoing Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. Though his nationalist party finished third in last month’s parliamentary elections, he’s a king maker of any new government. This combination of Albanian frustration and Serbian arrogance is a recipe for tension and possible violence in a province where 17,000 NATO-led international troops are stationed.

There are strong voices these days, especially in the U.S., who want the West to ignore Russia’s threatened veto of a Security Council resolution on Kosovo and then bilaterally move to recognize its independence. This is advocated as a policy of strength but in reality it is one of weakness. It will hurt EU’s moral standing in the
world, it will be unpopular with European public opinion and it threatens disunity among EU member states.

Bilateral recognition of Kosovo by selected countries will also dramatically weaken the West with respect to the frozen conflicts in Eurasia and open the door to reintroduce sphere of influence politics in Europe. That’s the real objective of the Putin judo diplomacy. The price for recognizing Kosovo’s independence will be to give Russia a free hand in dealing with the Eurasian conflicts.

The EU can regain the initiative only if it revises two of the pillars of its Kosovo policy. The first is that Brussels sees no link between EU policies with respect to the “frozen solutions” in the Balkans and the “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet space. And the second, that it is easier to negotiate Kosovo independence by talking to the Russians in the Security Council than in pressuring Belgrade and Pristina to reach an agreement on their own.

Both these assumptions are wrong. The EU and the U.S. do have the sticks and carrots to “convince” Belgrade and Pristina to reach an agreement. As important as the Kosovo issue is in Serbian politics, the reality is that while many Serbs are ready to cry for Kosovo, precious few would ever live there. Another truth is that Kosovo has more to lose than gain from a Serbia-boycotted recognition of its sovereignty. The last Serbian elections, no matter how ambiguous, have demonstrated that Serbia also aspires to a European future. What Serbia is afraid of is that the EU today is more willing to build protectorates than member states in the Balkans.

At the same time, Russia can only gain from preserving the current status quo in the region. The more unstable the region, the stronger the Russian influence. Moscow can continue to present itself as the guardian of Serbia’s territorial integrity while at the same time practically erode the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and Moldova.

Instead of trying to build a Chinese wall between Kosovo’s final status and the fate of the unrecognized entities in Transdnistria (part of Moldova), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (both of Georgia), the U.S. and the EU would be better advised to call the Russian bluff and come up with a comprehensive strategy to deal with both cases simultaneously.

At present Moscow is engaged more energetically than ever in the de facto integration of Transdnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia itself. Brussels’s strategy to play Kosovo and the “frozen conflicts” issues separately allows Russia at one and the same time to use the Kosovo negotiations as an instrument for destabilizing the government in Georgia and for pushing the EU toward “colonial solutions” for the Balkans.

The EU should not be scared by the Kosovo precedent for the other outstanding territorial disputes in the ex-U.S.S.R. It should shape it. If there is to be a Kosovo precedent, have it be: A settlement of the status issues through negotiations between
the interested parties after a sufficient period of international (not only Russian) presence, internal democratization and the return of refugees. It is only through linking its policies in the Balkans and the post-Soviet space that EU and the U.S. can gain strategic advantage in dealing with Russia’s attempts to play the spoiler.

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