

Extra Feature Story

Kosovo on the Cusp of Independence

January 22, 2008

The Serbian province of Kosovo -- which is made up of a largely ethnic Albanian population -- is expected to declare its independence within the coming months, while Serbia and Russia push to keep the area under Serbian control.

Although the United States and Germany have said that they will recognize Kosovo if it does declare itself a sovereign nation, the move toward independence has sparked strong resistance from Russia and several other European Union countries.

A rocky past

Kosovo, an area populated by 2 million people, most of whom are ethnic Albanians, was thrown into turmoil in 1999, when NATO forces, including American troops, launched a 78-day bombing campaign to stop Serbian forces from killing Albanians.

Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic, who died in 2004 while on trial for war crimes, brought the Albanian province under tighter Serbian control in 1989, removing its autonomy. Less than ten years later, Serbian and Kosovar Albanian military forces were openly fighting each other, according to NATO's Web site. In 2004, violence broke out again, and ethnic clashes and riots killed 22 people and wounded 500 others, according to CNN.

A shaky future

Since 2000, Kosovo has been administered by the United Nations. After a Dec. 10, 2007, deadline passed without a resolution for a negotiated independence agreement, Kosovo is expected to declare its independence after a second round of Serbian elections on Feb. 3.

The failure to negotiate an agreement, with Serbia and Russia pushing for Kosovo to remain under Serbian control, could spell trouble for the region.

"The United States and most of the European Union (led by Britain, France and Germany) will recognize Kosovo quickly. Russia and its allies will not. Kosovo's eight-year run as the biggest-ever U.N. project will end with great tension and a threat of violence that could spread to Bosnia," wrote former Clinton administration diplomat Richard Holbrooke in the Washington Post.

Serbian election

As the Kosovo situation simmers, Serbia is holding a presidential election that could help determine the future of relations among a complex web of European countries.

A close Jan. 20 election for a new Serbian president will go to a runoff vote on Feb. 3, with the Serbian people facing a choice between a leader with strong ties to Russia, or a Western-friendly incumbent.

Tomislav Nikolic, the Russian ally who is challenging pro-Western incumbent President Boris Tadic, won the first round of polling with 40 percent of the vote, Reuters reported.

"Serbs will have to choose between two concepts, for Europe or against it," Tadic said on Monday, according to Reuters. "There is no third way."

Just days earlier, on Jan. 10, Kosovo's parliament elected a former rebel leader, Hashim Thaci, to the office of prime minister. Thaci promised to officially break Kosovo from Serbia.

"It's an issue of weeks, and Kosovo will be an independent, sovereign and democratic country," Thaci told the Associated Press. "Independence is everything for us. We have sacrificed. We deserve it."

Putin stands firm

Despite support from powerful European nations and the United States, Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to stand firm on his opposition to Kosovo's imminent break from Serbia.

Russia has used its clout with the United Nations to block any formal independence resolution.

According to the Economist, Russia could be concerned that a successful Kosovo break could encourage other former Soviet territories to break away from Russia as well. "If people believe that Kosovo can be granted full independence, why then should we deny it to Abkhazia and South Ossetia(areas south of Russia)?" Putin said, according to the news magazine.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

© 2007 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions