

Extra Feature Story

Kosovo Declares Independence

February 19, 2008

The Serbian province of Kosovo -- which is made up of a largely ethnic Albanian population -- declared its independence Sunday, becoming the world's newest nation.

President Bush and the United States decided to recognize the new state, but the move toward independence has sparked riots in Serbia and an official rebuke from Russian officials.

"Kosovo committed itself to the highest standards of democracy, including freedom and tolerance and justice for citizens of all ethnic backgrounds," Bush said, according to Voice of America. "These are principles that honor human dignity. They are values America looks for in a friend and, soon, we will establish full diplomatic relations with the new nation of Kosovo."

The Russian foreign ministry released a statement condemning the declaration.

"The dangerous consequences were underlined of such a move, which is fraught with dangers for the foundations of world order and international stability formed over the course of decades," the statement said, according to Agence France-Presse.

Serbian prime minister Vojislav Kostunica issued a rebuke and ordered its U.S. ambassador to return to Serbia.

"This decision by the United States will not turn the false state (of Kosovo) into a real one," Kostunica told parliament, the Associated Press reported. "The government has ordered the immediate withdrawal of the ambassador from Washington."

Serbia also recalled its ambassadors from other nations that have recognized Kosovo as a new state, including France, Belgium, Britain and Italy.

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, which resulted in Kosovo declaring independence without a UN sanction, could inflame tensions in Serbia and among Russian officials.

"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

In January, Serbia held a key presidential election which could also determine the future of relations among a complex web of European countries.

After a runoff conducted February 3, incumbent President Boris Tadic won reelection, beating Russian-friendly candidate Tomislav Nikolic. Tadic favors better Serbian relations with the European Union.

Tadic spoke at an emergency United Nations Security Council meeting held after the declaration to seek a resolution on the independence declaration.

"This arbitrary decision represents a precedent which will cause irreparable damage to the international order," Tadic told the Security Council, the AP reported.

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 AP. "Independence is everything for us. We have sacrificed. We deserve it."

Putin stands firm

Russia has used its clout with the United Nations to block any formal independence resolution and is expected to block U.N. recognition of Kosovo with its veto power in the Security Council, the AP reported.

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)?" Russian President Vladimir Putin said, according to the news magazine.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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