

NATO/EU hypocrisy and the demonisation of Serbs

by Ljiljana Smajlovic via rialator - World Politics Review *Wednesday, Mar 5 2008, 7:30am*
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Serbs Struggle to Understand Western Support for Kosovo Independence

BELGRADE, Serbia -- As editor-in-chief of Serbia's oldest and most prestigious daily newspaper, Politika, I am at a loss to explain the West's stubborn support for Kosovo independence to my readers. Only nine years ago, my country was bombed for 78 days by the most powerful military alliance the world has ever seen, and the last thing I want is to pour oil over the fire of anti-Western sentiment. But the truth is, I find myself grappling with the same bitterness and resentment as most of my countrymen.

I was very much part of the democratic upheaval that rid Serbia of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, and all Serbia has done since was to mend its ways.

We sought to come to terms with the past, put old quarrels behind us, make peace with our neighbors and become friends with the United States and European countries that bombed us in 1999.

We set up war crimes courts and tried suspected war criminals, while extraditing others to the Hague Tribunal, where we sent a score of ex-presidents, including Milosevic himself, and roughly half of the former Army leadership.

We signed peace and cooperation treaties, invited Western companies to invest in Serbia's economy, and NGOs to monitor our progress in democracy and human rights.

We elected democratic rulers with impeccable anti-Milosevic credentials who carried out responsible and moderate policies, to the applause of Washington and Brussels.

We oppressed no ethnic minorities and violated no universal declarations.

In the meantime, a very different storyline unfolded in our southern province of Kosovo. As soon as Serb forces left Kosovo in June 1999, a massive campaign of reverse ethnic cleansing against 200,000 non-Albanians took place under the noses of 50,000 NATO troops.

Rather than the multiethnic democracy U.S. President Bill Clinton invoked on the day he dispatched the bombers, Kosovo is nowadays one of the most ethnically pure regions in Europe. Hundreds of Serb medieval monasteries, churches and cemeteries have been desecrated, dynamited, burned or razed to the ground. The few Serbs left in Albanian-majority areas live in NATO-guarded enclaves, fearful for their lives. Lawlessness is pervasive, crime is rampant, intolerance is the norm. Compared to Kosovo, post-Milosevic Serbia is a multiethnic paradise.

Why, then, the unseemly rush to grant Kosovo independence? Western officials grasp at straws to explain their motives. We are told "Milosevic lost Kosovo", and that we should blame him for the fate of the thousands and thousands of our co-nationals who have been cleansed from the mythical "old Serbia." But Milosevic is six feet under, and in Belgrade we feel as if we're witnessing the resurgence of the notion of "fundamentally evil" groups. If the Serbs' repression of Albanians in the

1990s lost them the right to govern Kosovo, as we were repeatedly told while NATO bombs rained on our heads, surely the Albanians lost political and moral high ground through ruthless discrimination against Serbs, Roma and other minorities?

Whatever Milosevic's transgressions, the Albanians' radical nationalism should neither have been encouraged nor rewarded in Kosovo. I am particularly disappointed by Chancellor Angela Merkel's championing of Kosovo's unilateral independence.

German history shows that radical solutions to the national question cannot be good, even when discontent is justified and minorities have legitimate grievances. It does not do to encourage secession or advocate annexation. Turning Kosovo into an independent state, with its half-terrorist, ultra-chauvinist leadership and its monoethnic population, is a radical event in European history. Of all countries, Germany should have opposed hasty independence for Kosovo.

Intellectually and morally, I do not know how to come to terms with Western democracies' support for Kosovo secessionists. For once, Serbs and their leaders did everything by the book. All they set out to do was to preserve their country's territorial integrity and sovereignty, guaranteed under Security Council Resolution 1244, which ended NATO's bombing. Serbia agreed to permanent international guarantees of Kosovo's political autonomy within the formal territory of Serbia, Kosovo's membership in international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, and Kosovo's right to enter different types of international agreements. Its leaders presented only legal arguments and negotiated peacefully under international auspices.

It did them no good. International law was broken. Under the pretext that Serbia's late dictator had been a terrible person, Serbia's Konrad Adenauer and Willy Brandt have been denied and scorned, while the leader of Kosovo's brutal guerrilla army, the KLA, is being hailed as a democrat and a statesman.

And no, I am not proud that hundreds of angry demonstrators went on a rampage in Belgrade last Thursday, shouting anti-American slogans, burning embassies and pillaging shops. But just like my fellow countrymen, I cannot help but note the irony in Washington's outrage. The Bush administration angrily denounced Serbia for failing to uphold its responsibility under international law to protect embassies.

The Belgrade rally that turned violent had been called to do the very same thing: chastise countries who conveniently ignore their responsibilities to protect sovereignty guaranteed under the U.N. Charter. The last time I checked, international law was also supposed to protect small countries.

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