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The West Must Back Full Independence for Kosovo

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The U.N.-administered Serbian province of Kosovo is expected to declare its independence from Belgrade within the next few days. The move to break away is strongly opposed by the Serbian regime as well as by Russia but is expected to gain the support of the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and most major members of the European Union.

Serbia has threatened a series of non-military retaliatory measures, while Russia has vowed to veto any application by Kosovo to become a U.N. member state. The European Union is already preparing to send an 1,800-strong civilian mission comprised of judges, prosecutors, policemen, and customs officials to take over from the United Nations and assist with the birth of the fledgling democracy.¹

It is important at this highly volatile time that the West remains united in fully supporting Kosovo's efforts to gain complete independence from Serbia. The Western powers must stand up to any threats coming from Belgrade and Moscow and support full membership for Kosovo in the United Nations as a sovereign state.

At the same time, firm guarantees must be given by both the European Union and NATO that the Serbian minority will be protected and given full rights in a newly independent Kosovo, as already pledged by Kosovo's Prime Minister. It is especially important that there is no retribution by ethnic Albanians that would encourage increased nationalism in Serbia or even an attempt by Serbs in Republika Srpska to break away from Bosnia.

The Case for Independence. In 1998 and 1999, Serbia waged a barbaric campaign of ethnic cleansing against ethnic Albanians that left more than 10,000 people dead. It was only the U.S.-British-led NATO intervention that prevented thousands more from being slaughtered by Slobodan Milosevic's dictatorship, and 16,000 Allied troops remain in the province today.

More than 90 percent of Kosovo's 2.1 million residents are ethnic Albanians; Serbs make up a tiny minority. There is no realistic alternative to independence for the province, a political reality that both Serbia and Russia must accept. As former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher warned in a speech in 1999, "[I]t would be both cruel and stupid to expect the Albanian Kosovans now to return to live under any form of Serbian rule."²

Serbian and Russian Opposition. The recent win by pro-Western Boris Tadic in Serbia's presidential election came as a huge relief to observers concerned about a possible drift back to extremism in Belgrade. Tadic, like most other Serbs, is against independence for Kosovo but pragmatically accepts that long-term engagement with the European Union is more important for his country's interests, and he seeks to separate the two issues. His win

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reflected a strong desire on the part of a majority of Serbia's voters to set aside the Kosovo question and seek stronger ties with Europe.

However, Tadic's win was extremely narrow, and he defeated his nationalist, pro-Russian opponent Tomislav Nikolic by a whisker. Nikolic is fervently opposed to any concessions to Kosovo, as is Serbia's powerful nationalist Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, who rebuffed an attempt by the EU last week to sign a free trade and visa liberalization accord with Belgrade. The fragile coalition that exists between Tadic's Democratic Party and Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia could even collapse in the coming weeks.³

Kostunica has vowed to refuse any cooperation with the EU over the Kosovo issue, declaring that "there would be no greater humiliation for Serbia if it, in any way, signed or agreed in some indirect way to this puppet state." His coalition government is refusing point-blank to accept secession by Kosovo and proclaimed this week that "all acts and activities of provisional authorities in Kosovo unilaterally declaring independence will be declared null and void for breaching the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia."⁴ Belgrade has already threatened possible sanctions against Kosovo, including cutting off Serbian-supplied power (up to 40 percent of the province's electricity needs are provided by Serbia).⁵

Moscow has refrained from direct talk of sanctions or disrupting the delivery of gas supplies but has been vocal in its opposition to Kosovo independence. President Vladimir Putin has stated that a unilateral declaration of independence would be "immoral and illegal,"⁶ and the Kremlin has made it clear that it will seek to block any attempt by Pristina to gain membership in international organizations such as the U.N. Russian

First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov has described Kosovo independence as "beyond international law" and "something close to opening a Pandora's Box."⁷

The West Must Be Tough with Serbia. Despite Belgrade's staunch opposition to independence for Kosovo, the European powers and the United States should encourage efforts by pro-Western leaders such as Tadic to seek membership in the European Union as a long-term goal and to bring Belgrade into the fold of the international community. It must be made clear, though, that any attempts by Serbia to sabotage Kosovo's drive for national sovereignty through punitive sanctions or fermenting ethnic unrest among Kosovo's Serb minority will only serve to isolate Belgrade and weaken its chances of entering the EU. Belgrade must also be warned that it must stick to the terms of the Dayton Accord and desist from any attempt to encourage the breakaway of Republika Srpska from Bosnia.

Above all, the West must insist that Serbia hand over the Bosnian Serb war criminals Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic for trial at the international war crimes tribunal at The Hague. Both are wanted for their major roles in the 1995 massacre of 7,000 Muslims at Srebrenica, the biggest atrocity in Europe since the Second World War and a shameful episode in Serbia's history that must never be forgotten. Unless Karadzic and Mladic are brought to justice, there can be no prospect of Serbia's becoming a member of the European Union.

Conclusion. Whether Belgrade and Moscow like it or not, Kosovo will shortly become independent, and this political reality should be welcomed by Washington, London, and other European capitals. Europe's newest state will need several years to be transformed into a successful, self-confident nation, free of the burden of international trusteeship, but

1. For details of the EU mission, see Tony Barber and Chrystia Freeland, "Law and Order Force to Secure Kosovo Stability," *Financial Times*, January 25, 2008.
2. Lady Margaret Thatcher, speech to the International Free Enterprise Dinner, April 20, 1999.
3. "Belgrade Buys Time," *Financial Times*, February 5, 2008.
4. "Serbia Refuses to Accept Kosovo's Imminent Secession," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2008.
5. "Power Shortages Haunt Disputed Territory," *Financial Times*, January 30, 2008.
6. "Serbia Refuses to Accept Kosovo's Imminent Secession."
7. "Russia Warns Against Game of Balkan Dominoes," *Financial Times*, February 12, 2008.

during that time the West must ensure Kosovo's sovereignty and security.

NATO must maintain a robust force in place, ready to repel any attempt to threaten the country's newfound freedom but also to ensure that there is adequate protection for the Serbian minority in the country. The people of Kosovo have reached a turning point in their history—liberty is within their

grasp. It is an aspiration that the United States and the free world must encourage and defend.

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