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Avoiding war and creating peace in Kosovo

By MATTHEW J. GAUDET

VIEWPOINT

Eight years ago, the United States and NATO intervened on behalf of ethnic Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Slobodan Milosevic became a household name in the United States, as daily news reports tracked the staggering number of refugees fleeing Kosovo.

Since that time, Kosovo has remained officially part of Serbia but is effectively governed by an interim administration formed by the U.N. Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). This summer Catholic Relief Services and the National Catholic Education Association sponsored five other Catholic schools teachers and me to visit Kosovo and speak with leaders of the UNMIK government, NATO security forces, the Catholic diocese, the Kosovo and speak with leaders of the UNMIK government, NATO security forces, the Catholic diocese.
satisfaction in the media, but not provide military support to Serbia. This agreement allowed NATO to engage in Kosovo without fear of war with Russia. This time around, the situation may be different. Many analysts cite the Kosovo standoff as part of a campaign by Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, to exert Russian authority over the former Eastern bloc. Mr. Putin has also publicly objected to NATO placing elements of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, two former Eastern Bloc countries. Furthermore, Russia does not want Kosovo’s independence to become a precedent that might legitimize the independence claims of Russia’s own rogue province of Chechnya.

Regardless of whether Russia would enter the fight, NATO must be wary of going to war in Kosovo again. In 1999, the U.S. military led the effort and was not engaged in conflict anywhere else in the world. Today, the military presence in Kosovo is predominantly European and would have to remain so in an all-out war, as U.S. forces are deployed with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Both the United Nations and many nongovernmental organizations have targeted Mitrovica for peace-building efforts. But reducing hatred is a complex process, especially when hatred culminates with the mutual destruction of each other’s homes and livelihood. To make matters worse, political pressure coming from Belgrade further hinders the healing process. Government functions from education to road maintenance continue to be funded by Serbia, and through this influence, Belgrade still maintains significant control over the Kosovo Serbs.

The Serbs we met were guarded when it comes to trusting Westerners, and with good reason. They describe themselves as refugees, isolated from their homes, families and the rest of their country. In 1999, most Serbs fled the Albanian sections of Kosovo to Serbia proper. Those Serbs remaining in Kosovo live in enclaves. While those we spoke with certainly want a different outcome from the process than their Albanian counterparts, they share the Albanians’ strong desire for a final settlement to the issue. Ultimately, they just want to be free to live a life without fear and isolation. Many consider Kosovo’s independence imminent and are prepared for that result as long as protections for them are in place.

It was clear to me that both sides desperately want peace and resolution. With such sharp division, it is hard to predict if independence would spark violence in Kosovo or if it would be a catalyst for increased economic growth and a necessary step toward reconciliation. Ultimately, the terms of the resolution, specifically the protections for Serbs in Kosovo, will probably dictate the short-term outcomes. But getting to a resolution may prove an impossible task.

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