Why Borders Are Not the Problem—or the Solution—for Serbia and Kosovo

In the Balkans, Redrawing Maps Serves Politicians, Not Citizens

By Eric Gordy October 10, 2018

People protest against Kosovo President Hashim Thaci's border change proposal deal with Serbia in Pristina, Kosovo, September 2018.
Hazir Reka / REUTERS

In August, political leaders in Kosovo and Serbia proposed to resolve long-standing

south of Serbia would be yoked to Pristina. Politicians and specialists weighed in on what remained a vague notion over the month that followed. Nobody seemed to regard the idea as brilliant, and in general responses ranged from grudging acceptance to shocked scorn. But neither side of the debate gave much consideration to what should have been its central question: How would the proposed changes affect the lives of those who reside in the areas under discussion?

The omission of such a consideration reflects the dangerous underlying presumption of those making and debating this proposal: that the basic desire of both Serbs and Albanians is little more than to be united with ethnic co-nationals. This assumption buys into the fundamental schemes of all Balkan (and other) nationalisms. If such a narrative is going to be bought at all, let the buyers beware.

There are almost certainly other solutions to the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina, involving elements that have not entered the discussion very much to date: securing the well-being of citizens, enhancing security and freedom, and building relations of trust between and within communities. These alternative approaches may not have quite as much appeal as a cartographic quick fix, but they promise to be more stable and durable.

BORDERS FOR WHOM?

One reason the land swap solution has become so focal is that it appears to serve the personal interests and political goals of three regional players: Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini. When he took power, Vucic was expected to produce the settlement with Kosovo that had eluded his predecessors, precisely because he was a figure from the far right whose constituency would have no place else to go. Six years in, efforts to normalize relations have unimpressively fizzled, and Vucic has to finally deliver. As for Thaci, an agreement that results in mutual recognition would resolve Kosovo's main international problem, which is

territory in Kosovo for sparsely developed villages in Serbia and appears to give Serbia veto power over what constitutes the territory of Kosovo. Finally, Mogherini is said to be looking for a legacy achievement with which to leave her position in the EU next year and return to Italian domestic politics. A comprehensive settlement of the Serbia-Kosovo dispute would fit the bill.

So here we are with an (outline of a) plan designed to give Vucic a float, Thaci a string to hang on to, and Mogherini a future advantage. The only difficulty is that the proposed resolution would have effects beyond just two states and three people. Are there other states with territories where ethnifying entrepreneurs stake their appeal on a demand for autonomy? Look no further than Bosnia and Herzegovina. Are there other states where chauvinist political leaders would love nothing more than to see a precedent for claiming territory where they have significant irredenta? Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban would be chuffed. Are there people living in the territories where a trade is suggested who would very likely be forced out of their homes, jobs, and livelihoods to accommodate the border pencillers' dreams? Such is always the case with this sort of self-interested fiddling.

Commentators in the United States and Europe have greeted the border swap proposal with mixed enthusiasm. In a recent op-ed in *The New York Times*, the author Charles Kupchan describes the plan as a bitter pill to be swallowed. He admits that the consequence of an exchange of territories would be "ethnic cleansing" but notes that the ethnic cleansing would be "peaceful." The suggestion is that while human costs might be high, political benefits are large, and the scheme is acceptable if it is reached by mutual consent. On the other side, critics of the deal warn about upsetting settlements reached elsewhere, about the danger of escalating demands, about precedents that could spiral, and ultimately about the risk of a new round of violence in the region. Michael Roth, Germany's minister of state for Europe, warned of a "Pandora's box," while the cleric Sava Janjic invoked the perennial "powder keg." The argument is that achieving even a fragile peace in the region has been an expensive, drawn-out challenge and that any disruption of the basic principles involved is like pulling

Both views share the assumption that the people in the disputed region are members of easily identified national groups and that what national groups want are national states. Where they differ is in their expectations about what would be produced by offering something to the nationalists. The advocates hope that one biscuit will be enough to soothe the beast, while the opponents fear that one biscuit will stoke insatiable appetites and rouse the rest of the menagerie.

DIVERSITY, NOT EXCLUSIVITY, DEFINES THE BALKANS

> **The assumption that Albanians, Serbs, or others in the Balkans fundamentally want most of all to live on a national territory is false.**

But the assumption that Albanians, Serbs, or others in the Balkans fundamentally want most of all to live on a national territory is false. The very high rate of migration out of the region into multicultural states where people are offered a better chance at obtaining employment, education, and access to social welfare offers contemporary evidence that material desires are at least as strong as symbolic ones. If we look more deeply into the history of the region, we will find that migration, mixing, diversity, reciprocal influence, and exchange constitute not only basic factors of social life over many centuries, but the core of those features that make the Balkans culturally and socially unique. Syncretism and diversity are the signature characteristics of the Balkans. This is apparent in every field of social life, from language and architecture to religion and cuisine.

In fits and starts over the past 150 years, nationalism has sought to unmake that rich historical and cultural legacy. Disappointment and resentment, directed toward both imposed ethnic dominance and unsuccessful multicultural regimes, have helped nationalists

toward the dominant group or to position themselves against the dominant group as cross-border enclaves.

At bottom, though, the nationalist project of creating homogeneous territorial units repeatedly comes into collision with the lived experience of people in the region. The only real means to make the project seem inevitable is by changing the population, and the only effective way to change populations is by violence. Outside observers are compelled to talk about Bosnia and Herzegovina now in terms of "ethnic territories" and "ethnic groups" because sustained violence changed the character of both territories and groups. Imposition and transposition of borders do the same thing, usually less dramatically and more slowly. The effect in both cases is the same: to legitimate the consequences of violence by making them appear as though they were the causes.

The implication here is that drawing new borders to create nationally homogeneous territories can succeed, but not without considerable use of force and not without a sustained campaign that encourages people to develop ideas about who they are, where they belong, and what they want. This campaign has been continuous and has partly succeeded, but it has also partly failed.

So much for conflict, then. But what about peace? As the recent failure of the Macedonia name referendum indicates, reaching agreements without first securing the assent of the people who would be affected is risky and insecure. Resolutions that are insincerely reached quickly come apart. Lasting peace requires that negotiators demonstrate sensitivity to, and awareness of, the way that people in the territories that politicians love to argue about actually live and what they actually need.

AN ALTERNATIVE

Projects for the redrawing of borders are strategies to satisfy the short-term desires of

An alternative approach would try to address the long-term needs of citizens and build relationships where they are absent or broken.

Such an approach would begin by recognizing the reality on the ground. Years have been wasted on disputes over whether Kosovo is a state or not. It is. It may have been an autonomous (sometimes more, sometimes less) province of Serbia at one point, but the last period of occupation demolished the legitimacy of this arrangement. It now has a population of 1.8 million people who would not accept rule from Serbia, and Serbia has neither the capacity nor the intent to assert rule over Kosovo. Mutual recognition and establishment of diplomatic relations would acknowledge this reality and provide an avenue for people in both states to realize their social and legal rights.

The region's political leaders would then need to prioritize meeting human and social needs. From 1991 onward in the region, there has been a good deal of discussion over whether this or that group of people ought to have a state. This discussion has not been accompanied by debate about what a state is for. The legitimacy of a state derives not from its ability to articulate a set of inventive cognitive associations but from its ability to provide for people's needs in the areas of employment, housing, education, health care, social protection, and basic security. Consolidating not just the existence but also the function of states is always necessary but might be thought of as essential in those areas (such as the northern municipalities of Kosovo) where governance has been surrendered into the hands of operators functioning in the shadow economy. The problems of environmental degradation are experienced in exactly the same way in the lungs of people regardless of whether the census defines them as Albanians or Serbs. A responsible government, or pair of governments, can establish its legitimacy by addressing citizens' immediate and tangible concerns.

An enduring solution will be one that promotes cooperation not only on concrete issues but also on issues related to the legacy of conflict.Many of the deepest sources of distrust are unresolved incidents of wartime violence. These incidents have so far remained unresolved because victims and witnesses are on one side of a border and perpetrators on another. Meanwhile, the prosecuting authorities on either side maintain no communication with each other. Technical solutions to this impasse could help in developing confidence and trust even in the absence of large-scale political gestures such as mutual recognition.

to sit together, work, and negotiate." However emotionally barren the relationship between the two politicians, it remains one of dependence and trust, in which each relies on the other to bring him through the protracted process of negotiation with something to sell to, or impose on, his public. The way the politicians express this bond has undermined relations of community and trust among people in the territories they influence. Any kind of sustainable solution will rebuild this trust, enhance citizens' security, and encourage communication.

If politicians redraw borders, they are doing it for themselves. Doing something for citizens means redrawing the public's relationship to the state. 

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