



Kosovo: the hour of Europe

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Subjects:

- [Conflict](#) [1]
- [conflicts](#) [2]
- [democracy & power](#) [3]
- [future of europe](#) [4]
- [reimagining yugoslavia](#) [5]
- [John O'Brennan](#) [6]
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Kosovo's imminent independence highlights the problem of the European Union's enlargement policy in the western Balkans, says John O'Brennan.

About the author

John O'Brennan is a [lecturer](#) [8] in European politics and society at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth ([NUIM](#) [8]), and a research fellow of the NUIM's [Centre for the Study of Wider Europe](#) [8]. Among his books are [The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union](#) [8] (Routledge, 2006) and [The EU and the Western Balkans: Stabilization and Democratization](#) [8] through Enlargement (Routledge, 2008). His work has appeared in the *Australian*, *Die Welt*, *El País*, the *Guardian*, the *Irish Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Japan Times*, the *Scotsman* and elsewhere

In 1991, as Yugoslavia was on the point of imploding, the Luxembourg foreign minister Jacques Poos spoke for many prominent Europeans when he proclaimed that "the hour of Europe has struck". The implication was clear - the then twelve-member European Community had a moral responsibility to intervene so as to prevent an escalation of conflict.

[John O' Brennan](#) [9] is a lecturer in European politics and society at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth ([NUIM](#) [9]). Among his books are [The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union](#) [10] (Routledge, 2006) and (forthcoming) [The EU and the Western Balkans: Stabilization and Democratization through Enlargement](#) [11] (Routledge, 2008). Tragically, no substantive EU political engagement was attempted and Yugoslavia descended into an abyss of fratricidal ethnic cleansing which cost upwards of 250,000 lives. Today, as the government of Hashim Thaci formed after the November 2007 [elections](#) [12] in Kosovo prepares to declare independence from Serbia, the future of the [western Balkans](#) [13] looms as the most serious geopolitical issue facing the enlarged EU of [twenty-seven](#) [14] member-states. How should the EU respond?

The question is sharpened by the political mood in Serbia, where campaigning for its own presidential election on [20 January 2008](#) [15] is underway. The incumbent Boris Tadic, a liberal and pro-European, remains favourite to win re-election, but opinion polls suggest his lead over [Tomislav Nikolic](#) [16] of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party has narrowed and is within the margin of error.

The increasingly nationalist and uncompromising rhetoric of the administration of prime minister Vojislav Kostunica, supported by increasingly assertive Russian diplomacy, declares that Serbia will not yield sovereignty over Kosovo and cannot be compelled to do so. The "top state secret" action plan [agreed](#) [17] at an emergency meeting of Serbia's cabinet on 14 January does nothing to allay the gathering tension.

Serbia's volatile political situation is exacerbated by security worries, related partly to the presence of significant (and unsettled) ethnic Albanian populations in the Presevo valley in southern Serbia and across the border in Macedonia. In such circumstances, Pristina's declaration of independence will almost inevitably further destabilise an already [fragile](#) [18] region.



A stalled momentum

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Mary Kaldor, "[The Balkans-Caucasus tangle: states and citizens](#) [27]" (9 January 2008) Why do these events matter so much for the European Union? The reason is partly that the EU cannot disclaim its great share of [responsibility](#) [28] for the region: the EU has moved closer to the centre of events in the Balkans over the past five years, notably assuming a more active role in Bosnia's internal security. The European council summit in December 2007 agreed to the deployment of a 1,800-strong EU police and civilian mission in Kosovo itself.

At the same time, the EU is far from unified on a resolution to the Kosovo question. Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain are among the member-states most [reluctant](#) [29] to recognise the putative new state, even if the EU plays a lead role in supervising its independence. Spain, in particular, worries about the precedent Kosovo would set for the Basque country, where aspirations for an independent state remain to the fore.

This internal EU impasse remains unresolved. Yet the union's collective responsibility remains, even as its leaders are aware that a Kosovo-generated political crisis in the Balkans would increase pressure on them from a variety of sources: among them the further entrenchment of Balkan organised-crime groups in European life, new waves of refugees fleeing upheaval, and a further [fracturing](#) [30] in relations with Russia. In short, Brussels is acutely conscious of how much is at stake surrounding Kosovo, including the EU's credibility in the region and beyond.

The Kosovo-Serbia [endgame](#) [31] is unfolding in the wake of the European commission's publication in November 2007 of its annual "[report cards](#) [32]" on progress made by the western Balkan states in their efforts to secure membership of the EU. The reports delivered an unequivocally negative verdict. Bosnia and Serbia came in for particular criticism as both countries have regressed to a politics dominated by narrowly defined ethnic nationalism (though the judgment may have helped jolt Bosnia at least into a timely change of direction; see Peter Lippman, "[Crisis and reform: a turnaround in Bosnia](#) [33]", 18 December 2007). Across the region corruption is, according to the reports, still deeply rooted in both public and private life and efforts undertaken to combat it "are not commensurate with the magnitude of the problem". At the very least there exists a shady nexus between the political classes and criminality. With the exception of Croatia, 2007 was a year when the momentum toward meeting accession-related reforms slowed considerably.

A time to lead

So what can the European Union do to avert a so-called "Balkan enlargement train-wreck"? Three things. First, and irrespective of what follows from a unilateral [declaration](#) [25] of independence by Kosovo, it needs to engage much more seriously and consistently with local political actors in the region. In practice, this means moving toward a partnership model of governance which delivers much more substantive local ownership over the political process. The commission reports stress the



importance of state-building and better governance across the region. But the only way to realise that ambition is to allow it to happen from *within* - by empowering local actors and encouraging the development of substantive citizen participation in politics (see Mary Kaldor, "[The Balkans-Caucasus tangle: states and citizens](#) [27]", 9 January 2008).

A second key shift in policy that is required involves an increase in the provision of enlargement-related pre-accession aid. The amount of aid being channelled toward the western Balkans is paltry in comparison to that provided to states like Ireland, Greece and Portugal in the past, and is also far less than recent entrants such as Poland and Bulgaria currently receive. The EU should move quickly to at least double the amount of subvention distributed across the region in a renewed effort to support capacity-building and economic development.

The third EU change is to acknowledge the important truth at the heart of this story: that [enlargement](#) [34] has been central to the success of the European integration process over the past thirty years. The process has contributed incalculably to the stabilisation and democratisation of southern and eastern Europe. It remains the only game in town for the incorporation of the western Balkans into European institutional and political structures.

The conundrum facing the European Union is that the very success of previous enlargement rounds now calls into question the viability of future expansion. After the accession of twelve new member-states in 2004 and 2007, the EU has often been [diagnosed](#) [32] as suffering from "enlargement fatigue". And there is little doubt that the gloomier rhetoric emanating from many European capitals has played a part in the slowdown in the reform process across the Balkans. Today, under the presidency of one of the 2004 entrants, with close ties to the region - [Slovenia](#) [35] - the EU should insist that key conditions for progress of accession negotiations are satisfied. But the Kosovo crisis also highlights the evident need for the EU to embrace a more pro-active and engaged strategy for bringing the western Balkans closer to Europe.



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