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Last month the earth in the Balkans moved, but you would not have known about it from reading the mainstream media—not surprising, perhaps, because th

ere was no mass violence nor financial eruption.

The mover was German leader Angela Merkel. She marched into the office of Serbian president Boris Tadic and in unlikely EU talk made clear to him the Serb political game in Kosovo was over. Kosovo would not be partitioned; the area inhabited by Serbs north of the Ibar River was Kosovo territory. Serbia has to stop running that area. The Kosovo issue had to be resolved before Serbia could enter the EU.

It was a shock to Tadic, a favorite of the West, who had been led by the EU commission and a few EU states to believe he could politically straddle the issue of Kosovo indefinitely: maintaining a tough line on the north and a rejectionist position on the existence of an independent state of Kosovo, while starting access negotiations and gaining ultimate accession even without settling the problem. Merkel's voice is a major one, and her straightforward approach shook political circles in Belgrade and led to dismay and pessimism. She was impervious to the view that requiring Serbia to deliver on Kosovo would help elect more dyed-in-the wool nationalists. Her remarks have already changed Belgrade's tone in dealing with the issue of northern Kosovo.

Politically significant progress on the issue was also recently made in Kosovo itself, causing Serbia to retreat a little on dealing with northern Kosovo and enhancing the Kosovo government's position in the area. In July the government of Prime Minister Hashim Thaci unilaterally sent small police units into northern Kosovo to take over customs posts at two border-crossing stations with Serbia. Acting in accord with U.S. and EU principles regarding the inclusion of the north within Pristina's sovereignty but moving mostly on its own, the Kosovo government began enforcing—however feebly—the existing border rather than accepting Serbia's *de facto* changes. It was a small demonstration of sovereignty that was grudgingly but firmly accepted by the internationals in Kosovo. Moreover, despite Kosovo's action the two parties finally reached an agreement that permits the wording of customs stamps to be

accepted by Serbian customs officials facilitating trade between the two countries.

Efforts in Kosovo to change the situation in the north and to take over the administration of customs stations, not surprisingly, led to some altercations—Kosovo Serbs blocked roads, NATO intervened to keep some roads clear—but so far very little violence. Tensions are far from over. On September 16 the European mission in Kosovo airlifted small Kosovo police and customs teams to the two crossing points to avoid confrontations at the roadblocks set up by Kosovo Serbs to protest the new border arrangements and the symbolic presence of Kosovar officials there. The violence that many predicted has yet to materialize, and demonstrators have yet to appear on Serbian streets. Belgrade apparently doesn't want violence in north Kosovo for fear it would be counterproductive to the EU candidacy decision on Serbia later this year.

Kosovo has again altered the international agenda by aligning its actions with European and U.S. principles. The problem in the north, of course, is still dangerous and far from resolved; violence can indeed break out at any moment. The Serbs in the north are strongly opposed to rule from Pristina, and in the end arrangements must be made for the security and management of their affairs by the Serb community.

The message Merkel delivered in Serbia also has implications for Bosnia with its continuing sharp ethnic divisions. Bosnian Serb separatists in Serb-dominated Republika Srspka have flouted the Dayton peace agreement, tied the central government in knots and laid the foundation for eventual secession. Its leader Milorad Dodik has alternated in his rhetoric between complete autonomy and independence for his ethnic entity. There are nationalists in Serbia who see the Bosnian Serb entity as a real part of Serbia. Playing it politically careful in Serbia, President Tadic always reaffirms his dedication to the Dayton accords but does nothing to constrain Dodik. Merkel shrewdly sidestepped this messy situation by remaining silent on any Bosnian partition, conveying Berlin's view that Bosnian borders are settled by the Dayton accords and require no public restatement of principle.

Recent Kosovo developments have helped make clear that most of the West has exhausted its patience with talk of ever more border changes in the Balkans and that further partitions are unwelcome. As the price for joining modern Europe, Serbia is expected to ultimately renounce territorial claims and ambitions on its neighbors, as other European states have done since 1945. That has not politically sunk in with Belgrade, but there has been an important step forward. The German chancellor has led the West out of the weeds.

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