

The ethnic partition which could bring war back to the Balkans

Dissent is brewing as Serbia and Kosovo plot a land swap along 'ethnically homogenous' lines. Anthony Loyd fears another conflict is coming



President Thaci and his Serbian counterpart hope a land swap along ethnic lines will end their territorial disputes and pave the way to EU membership DENIS BALIBOUSE/REUTERS
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Serbia's rulers cannot be rid of their troublesome priest. Twenty years after becoming a bane to Slobodan Milosevic, chastising the president for the use of disproportionate force in Kosovo, Father Sava Janjic is once again a thorn in the side of a Serbian strongman.

This time the Orthodox abbot, nicknamed the "cybermonk" for his online skills in denouncing threats to the isolated Serb populace in Kosovo, has taken President Vucic to task over a plan to slice Kosovo's surviving Serbian community in half. If enacted, the partition of Kosovo along so-called "ethnically homogenous" lines would not only abandon Serbia's most sacred sites from its claim forever but could be the tinder for the next Balkan war.

"The partition idea is preposterous," Father Sava, 52, told *The Times* at Visoki Decani, the 14th-century monastery in southern Kosovo which is one of the Serbian Orthodox Church's most holy locations. "Cutting the body of Kosovo's Serbs would have devastating consequences for us. Our population would disappear. We have managed to stay here now, with great difficulties, but what would happen to us if there was a change of territories? It would be the end."



Father Sava Janjic: “What would happen to us if there was a change of territories? It would be the end.”ALAMY

Father Sava is not alone in speaking out against the idea of Serbia and Kosovo redrawing their borders to swap ethnically pure slices of territory in return for a final peace settlement — a move regarded by most seasoned observers as fascism in all but name.

The partition idea has been mooted then abandoned at various stages since Kosovo gained its partially-recognised independence in 2008. The US, Britain and Germany were among the most vehement opponents of land swapping, fearing that a partition agreement between Kosovo and Serbia would set a precedent exacerbating outstanding territorial grievances across the Balkans, notably in Bosnia.

The most combustible of all former Yugoslav republics, Bosnia’s Serbian minority has continued to push for unification of their territory with Serbia ever since the Bosnian war ended in 1995, and separatist calls — leant strength by talk of the Kosovo partition — have dogged the run up to Sunday’s Bosnian election where sectarian party politics have deeply antagonised existing divisions.



International attitudes to a Kosovo-Serb land swap changed dramatically in August this year, when John Bolton, President Trump’s national security adviser, gave an amber light to land swap advocates.

“Our policy, the US policy, is that if the two parties can work it out between themselves and reach agreement, we don’t exclude territorial adjustments,” Mr Bolton said, reflecting President Trump’s laissez-faire attitude to the Balkans.

To the horror of European diplomats, Bolton’s words were interpreted as US acquiescence by Kosovo’s President Hashim Thaci and Serbia’s Aleksandar Vucic, who have accelerated their behind-the-scenes negotiations to swap each other slithers of ethnically pure territory.

As quid pro quo the Kosovan and Serb presidents hope for a final settlement and agreement on one another’s territory; Serbian recognition of Kosovo, and a smooth path to EU membership. So far, early discussions have focused around swapping four Serb majority municipalities in northern Kosovo for three Albanian municipalities — Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovc — in southern Serbia. The EU’s High Representative has already hosted talks on the issue between the two sides in Brussels.

Laying out his own opening negotiating position to *The Times* in Pristina this week, President Thaci used acrobatic terminology, eschewing the term “partition” in favour of “light correction”.



Opponents of the land swap protesting in Pristina last week
ARMEND NIMANI/GETTY IMAGES

“There will be no partition, there will be no exchange of territories,” he said. “What I am working for is a ‘light correction’ of the borders that will encompass Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovc. But under no circumstances shall assets like the Ujman Lake, the northern part of the city of Mitrovica or the Trepca mines be open for discussion. They will always be part of Kosovo, that’s non-negotiable.”

President Vucic has yet to reveal his hand, but is known to favour a partition that is the reverse of Thaci's offer, ensuring Serb territories in the north of Kosovo are seceded to Serbia without any swap for Albanian municipalities. The idea has already been slammed by opposition parties in both countries.

"It is a profoundly dangerous idea — redrawing borders in the Balkans," said Vuk Jeremic, the former minister of foreign affairs for Serbia who is now leader of Narodna Stranka, a leading Serb opposition party. "No one can convince me that if boundaries are redrawn here along ethnic lines that it won't be demanded in other places across the Balkans."

Aside from the potential of causing a violent chain reaction, the partition idea has numerous obvious flaws. The Presevo valley in Serbia, home to some 60,000 Albanians, includes Corridor Ten, Serbia's strategic highway south, which Belgrade would never trade away.

Meanwhile, in Kosovo the proposed territory to be swapped would leave the majority of Kosovo's remaining Serbs, as many as 70,000 people, and all of the Orthodox Church's most holy sites in Kosovo, abandoned in territory south of the Ibar river excluded by the deal.

In the purge of the Serb population that followed Nato's intervention, the number of Serbs decreased by around fifty per cent to between 90,000 and 120,000. Most of these live in scattered communities in the south, and any partition would likely precipitate their flight from Kosovo.

Mere talk of the land swap has escalated tensions between communities, and neither Mr Vucic nor Mr Thaci has yet reached out to explain to either Serbs nor Albanians what the deal might involve.

During the 1998-1999 conflict in Kosovo, Father Sava attracted the personal ire of Mr Milosevic when he repeatedly emailed local and foreign journalists and human rights groups over the disproportionate use of force by Serb units operating against Kosovan guerrillas.

Trading emails in favour of tweets, now the cybermonk has once again stepped into the centre of the arena, this time to denounce the partition plan, and has again been vilified by Serbia's state media in response.

"I have been proclaimed a public enemy of my own country and by the president himself for tweeting against his position," the priest said. "I've been called a traitor, an Albanian patriot, an agent of foreign powers."

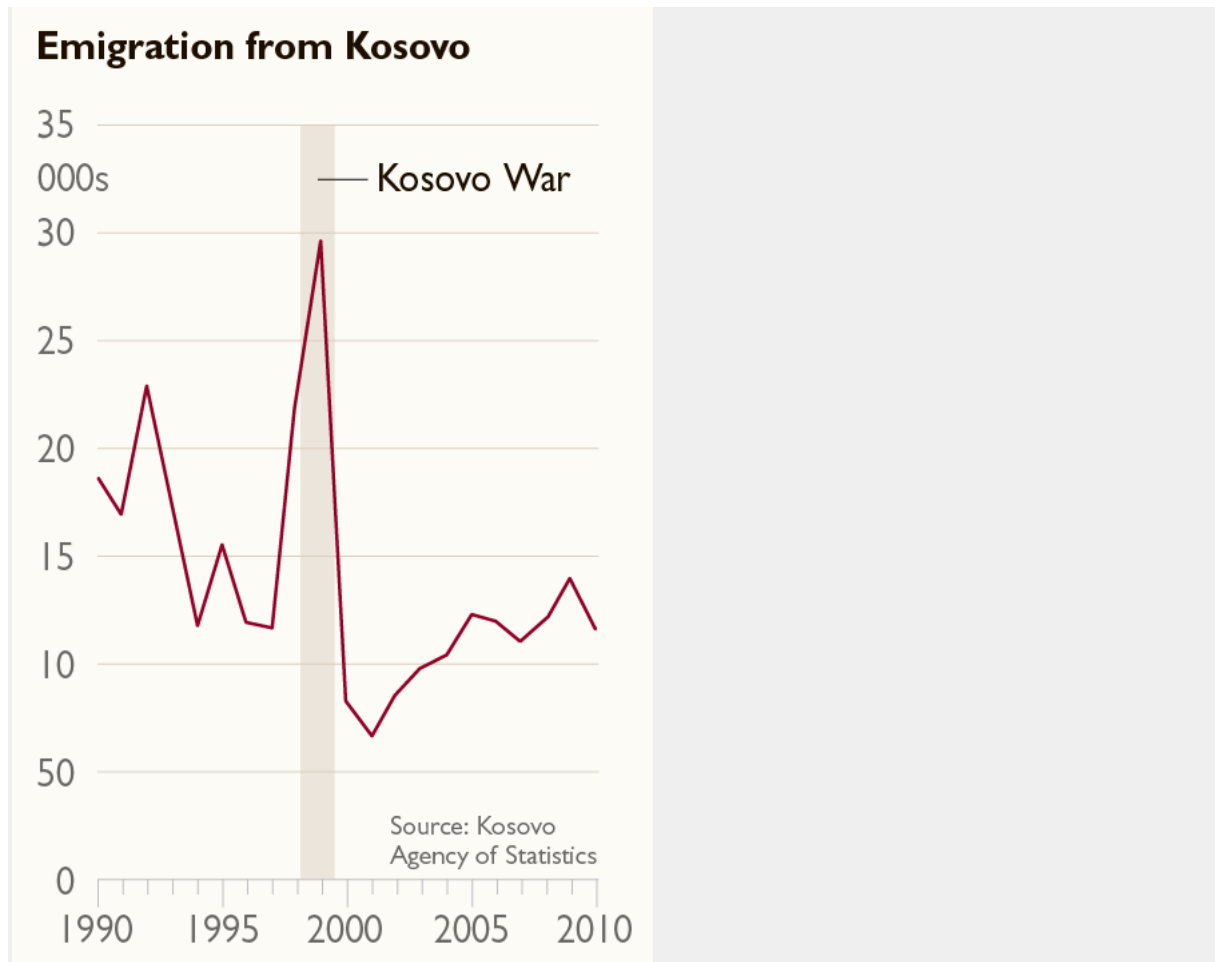


Serbia has been a formal candidate for EU membership since 2011, a designation yet to be given to Kosovo ARMEND NIMANI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

In the new era of political mercenaries, high value lobbyists have joined the fray, employed by both presidents to dust up their image, help gloss over persistent allegations of their links to organised crime and human rights abuses, and seize the narrative in favour of the deal.

Though Tony Blair's Institute for Global Change has denied that the former prime minister is lobbying for a partition deal on behalf of the Serbian president, insiders privy to the talks have repeatedly asserted that Mr Blair has already met Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, asking her to reconsider her opposition to a partition plan, and is now on his way to Washington for pro-partition talks with the National Security Council.

The plan has few supporters inside Kosovo among either Serbs or Albanians. Even north of the Ibar River, where an estimated 40,000 Serbs live in the four municipalities under consideration for the land swap, the community is divided and afraid over options concerning their future. A leading opponent of partition there, Oliver Ivanovic, was assassinated at the start of the year, silencing Serb opposition to Vucic.



“Talk of this plan has caused us to act like migrating cattle in Africa who come to a river,” one Serb, who preferred not to be named, told me there. “The thirsty herd pushes forward to drink, but only those at the front can see the crocodiles.”

Though no agreement on the land swap is anywhere near impending, as Vucic and Thaci size each other up for the next round of talks the apparent lethargy in the EU and Washington toward the prospect of an officially sanctioned ethnic cleansing and the abandonment of political values that were once thought inviolable have raised the spectres of war once more.

“We survived everything here,” said Father Sava, as he gazed around the ancient walls of the monastery, “500 years of Ottoman Empire, the march of armies, both world wars. But now I fear this partition idea could be devastating for us. It worries me that so many people can see this unholy alliance between two autocrats intent on holding on to power — power in which organised crime plays such a role — and yet no one in the EU has said ‘this won’t bring you to Europe, this will lead you to no ode of joy’.”