

AUTUMN 2019

# Securing the future: lessons from history #2

EVENT REPORT



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## Why every military intervention needs a coherent political strategy

Beware the anarchy of a political vacuum after a peacekeeping military intervention! This was a key conclusion from the second debate in the 'Lessons from history' series, held in Brussels by Friends of Europe on 24 September 2019. Featuring three peace and security experts highly familiar with the Balkans, the event explored lessons learned – both painful and thought-provoking – from the Kosovo\* conflict in 1999. Together with a special guest from NATO, Admiral James G. Foggo III, the panellists also debated current challenges for the region's stability and prosperity.

"The international community's response to Kosovo\* signalled a new pro-active approach to preventing crimes against humanity," said the moderator **Jamie Shea**, Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe and former deputy assistant secretary-general at NATO. By intervening militarily in the region alongside UN and EU partners, he added, the international community hoped to avoid the worst of the calamities that had happened earlier that decade in Bosnia. This was also a clear signal that war crimes would no longer go unpunished, thus ending a culture of impunity for those responsible. More generally, the intervention lit a beacon of hope for reconciliation among people and societies in a region of conflict.

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**Mats Berdal**, Professor of Security and Development at the Department of War Studies, King's College London and Director of the Conflict, Security and Development Research Programme (CSDRG)

By tapping into everyone's hindsight gathered over the past two decades, Mr Shea was eager to assess this controversial conflict's legacies – among them the risks, opportunities and repercussions of a military intervention. He suggested the most beneficial outcome has been the international community's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) commitment, endorsed unanimously by the United Nations in 2005.

### A worthwhile and valid intervention

All three panellists agreed that Kosovo\* is now a safer and better place, thanks to the intervention of NATO and the EU in 1999. "NATO intervened on the grounds of there being an overwhelming humanitarian necessity and to protect the Kosovar Albanian minority from violence," remarked **Mats Berdal**, Professor of Security and Development at the Department of War Studies, King's College London and Director of the Conflict, Security and Development Research Programme (CSDRG).

He argued that NATO's rationale was the culmination of a process, which was given powerful impetus especially by the UN peacekeeping intervention following the

Srebrenica massacre of 8,000 Muslim Bosniaks in 1995. Four years later, during the Kosovo\* conflict, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said there was an emerging international norm against the violent repression of minorities and that this norm should take precedence over concerns about national sovereignty.

Without doubt, said Berdal, this interventionist viewpoint was controversial and sparked intense debate about the legality of NATO taking military action in Kosovo\* without the explicit authorisation of the UN Security Council. Many opponents of this military intervention underlined how it was simply about 'might is right', with regional regime change being the ultimate goal, Berdal argued this action is now widely considered as "legitimate, despite being legally ambiguous." This indicates a shift in the international community's viewpoint, whereby state sovereignty is of secondary importance to protecting a country's minorities in dire circumstances.

### Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

A second key and still developing legacy of the Kosovo\* conflict, in the wake of the international community's intervention, is the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) commitment. For instance every single UN peacekeeping operation since 1999 has featured the protection of civilians as one component. Shea wondered if this R2P commitment was ever a consideration for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in this region. Not really, replied **Paivi Nikander**, Deputy Head of Mission in OSCE Field Operations Mission to Kosovo\* (2013-17), because she believes the OSCE saw this as more of a responsibility for the UN due to sovereignty issues.

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**Andrew Gray**, EU Editor at POLITICO Europe and former Reuters chief correspondent for the Balkans

Yet for all its good intentions, R2P remains problematic. Berdal said it raises several tricky questions regarding humanitarian intervention, chief among them the need for a clear political strategy. What happens after a military intervention, in the post-bellum phase when chaos is common? Do you have responsibility for a country after intervening? "In Kosovo\*, NATO left a very large footprint with the UN mission – unlike what happened in Libya in 2011. Yet the Kosovo\* operation was very difficult and challenging, and a formidable task without a clear political end-state," he added. People naively believed in the transformative effect of this and later interventions – a belief that has been challenged retrospectively. This conclusion on humanitarian intervention was echoed by the whole panel and much of the audience.

We could be gloomy about R2P today, especially after the death knell that seemed to be tolled for this commitment in the wake of the Libyan intervention in 2011, said Berdal. However, he opined that this legacy of Kosovo\* still resonates as legitimate



1. **Bernard Nikaj**, Ambassador, Embassy of Kosovo\* to Belgium; **James Foggo**, Commander, NATO Allied Command Operations (ACO), Headquarters Allied Joint Force Command Naples; **Miomir Udovicki**, Ambassador, Mission of the Republic of Serbia to NATO
2. **Jamie Shea**, Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe
3. **Mats Berdal**, Professor of Security and Development, Kings College London
4. **Päivi Nikander**, Deputy Head of Mission in the OSCE field Operation Kosovo\* (2013-2017); **Andrew Gray**, EU Editor, Politico; **Mats Berdal**, Professor of Security and Development, Kings College London
5. **Pascaline Gaborit**, Director, Pilot4Dev



with the international community, as evidenced by the EU's intervention in 2014 in the Central African Republic, where there is violence between armed groups and against civilians.

### Empty spaces spell danger

For Andrew Gray, EU Editor at POLITICO Europe and former Reuters chief correspondent for the Balkans, the biggest lesson learned from Kosovo\* is the danger of creating a "political vacuum" after military intervention. For example this situation removed many of the previous society's security structures, before new ones could be established. "If you don't fill that vacuum very quickly, it will be filled by others and often by nefarious actors who, after they've established control, can be difficult to remove," he warned. A similar vacuum resulted in turmoil during the Iraq War of 2003 to 2011.

The journalist spent 15 months in Kosovo\*, just after the bombing campaign ended. He described the first year of Kosovo\*'s post-conflict history as "very volatile and traumatic" and often witnessed the regional chaos and violence suffered by all ethnic groups. One of his clearest memories was of the Kosovar Albanians, whose homes had been destroyed by Serb forces and who had spent weeks in terrible refugee camps, moving into the homes of Serbs now fleeing a new wave of violence. Thousands of Serbs and other minorities were targeted, chose to flee or left for various reasons in that immediate aftermath.

“ We should have seized the momentum of 1999 and looked harder for the windows of opportunity

**Paivi Nikander**, Deputy Head of Mission in OSCE Field Operations Mission to Kosovo\* (2013-17)

Gray cited a second lesson he drew from his early months in Kosovo\*, while witnessing NATO troops taking risks and struggling to establish law and order: "To establish control in a political vacuum, you must be willing to match your rivals. "One senior UN official in Kosovo\* told me he felt there was too much tolerance for intolerance," he added, despite the presence of a large NATO and UN force. Ideally, during this chaotic and dangerous time, NATO should have adopted a more aggressive posture alongside a temporary period of martial law. In conclusion, he reckoned that NATO had decided that Kosovo\* was a place worth fighting for, backed by an air campaign, but not a place worth dying for while trying to establish rule of law with the peacekeepers on the ground. "Some of the Kosovo\* lessons were pretty clear early on, but they weren't learned early enough for the interventions that followed, particularly in Iraq," added Gray.

The vacuum theory around an intervention like Kosovo\* is very relevant today and still somewhat taboo, said Nikander. She agreed it's hard to assess who did what, what they should do and what mechanisms are required to address resulting problems. Yet in her view the greatest challenge in Kosovo\* is the lack of an exit strategy for the international community, which leaves the region highly dependent on international aid. Nor did anyone seem to have a plan on how to help it in the long term. Today NATO has a force of around 3,500, which is just 7% of the total of 20 years ago.

## A missed opportunity?

“We should have seized the momentum of 1999 and looked harder for the windows of opportunity,” said Nikander, after revealing how highly dependent Kosovo\* is on aid from the international community today. Nor does the future look that promising. For while the economy has grown by 4% annually since 2015, Kosovo\* still has a 30% unemployment rate, low international investment and a brain drain of young people in a country where a third of the population is under 30 years of age.

On the plus side, the EU set up the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR) in Kosovo\* in 2000. Nikander praised the agency for being “very effective in delivering aid and learning how to operate in tricky areas.” It was also expanded to manage the EU’s main assistance programmes in the wider region, including Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of North Macedonia. She also mentioned the setting up of EU Special Representatives as a further positive result of the Kosovo\* intervention.

Another major problem in Kosovo\* is the “lack of local ownership,” said Nikander. She criticised the endless cycle of elections – which have taken place every second year since the war – and an ever-changing civil service, hampered by low salaries and corruption. “The result is a weak pact between the government and citizens,” she said, in a region that desperately needs a strong administration. Both Nikander and Berdal concluded that European decision-makers must quickly find a positive political solution for Kosovo\*.

## Valuing local voices

During questions and answers, an audience member acknowledged that Kosovo\* was not a textbook peacekeeping operation, but it undoubtedly saved many lives. Another participant felt the EU and others could learn useful lessons by analysing the situation in Kosovo\* prior to the crisis. Andrew Gray added: “I don’t think we can draw good lessons until we hear from the people who were affected the most in Kosovo\*.”

Echoing earlier remarks about the political vacuum today, the Ambassador for Kosovo\* in Brussels highlighted the need to have an endgame in his country and to fight the brain drain by giving hope to young people there. The Serbian Ambassador to NATO bluntly said that military interventions don’t solve problems, citing Kosovo\*’s current instability and all the troops there. He called for a political solution and compromise.

## A glimmer of hope

The debate was neatly wrapped up by special guest **Admiral James G. Foggo III**, the Commander of Allied Joint Force Command Naples, US Naval Forces Europe, and US Naval Forces Africa, with responsibility for 4,000 troops in Kosovo\*. After underlining his professional impartiality as a military officer, the admiral said he was proud that his job entails speaking to all sides in Kosovo\*.

Admiral Foggo highlighted a number of negative factors in the region. For instance, he believes that today’s economy in Kosovo\* is not helped by a special tariff slapped by the government on imports from Serbia in 2018. “This sanction comes with a

€400mn cost, affecting both sides, and has become a political issue that can only be resolved in the upcoming election,” he said. Feathers have also been ruffled by the Kosovo\* Special Court for war crimes, aimed at investigating crimes against ethnic Serbs during and after the 1998-99 war, which led to the resignation of Kosovan Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj.

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Nevertheless, the admiral perceived reasons for hope in the region. He said he is an admirer of several Kosovan entrepreneurs in the IT and fruit sectors, because they are busy creating new jobs, business and wealth for the wider community. He recently met with them recently and was told their businesses are booming and even expanding internationally – symbolising how this region can aspire to a brighter future.

On that note, the debate moderator concluded: “We all agree on the urgency of a definitive political solution for Kosovo\*, but in the meantime, citizens and entrepreneurs should build the future with their own hands!”

\*For the United Nations Development Programme, references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). For the European Union, this designation used is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with the UN Security Council resolution 1244/1999 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

