Kosovo’s declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 represented a milestone in the turbulent politics of the Balkans and began a new phase in the history of the long disputed Kosovo territory. Once a province within Yugoslavia and long claimed by Serbia, Kosovo asserted full sovereignty and declared itself “a democratic, secular and multiethnic republic.” Combined with the introduction of a new constitution, the move quickly won support from a wide range of states, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and their fellow G7 members. Kosovo’s claims to democratic status were also backed by its record of political development since 1999. This has included the establishment of a range of democratic political institutions (including the elected, 120-member Assembly of Kosovo that issued the independence declaration) operating within a context of regular, free, and fair elections that have led to peaceful turnovers of power.

Yet Kosovo’s political status remains unclear, and its progress uncertain. It is too soon to call this territory of about 11,000 square kilometers and two million people either a securely sovereign state or a full-fledged democracy. Most of the world’s governments have yet to endorse Kosovo’s declaration, while Serbia and Russia have led the way in opposing it. The European Union remains divided. Several prominent EU members, led by Spain, have avowed their opposition to Kosovar statehood. Kosovo’s democratic project also labors under difficult challenges. Since NATO intervened to force the withdrawal of Serbian troops in 1999, political development has been overseen by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Working with domestic actors, UNMIK has helped to lay the groundwork for institutions, standards, and practices.
that are consistent with democracy. Yet while there has been significant progress, things have not always gone smoothly, and Kosovo continues to grapple with the complex problem of how to make liberal democracy a reality in a postconflict society divided between an Albanian majority and a Serb minority. Institutions remain weak, the rule of law is fragile, and most of the ethnic-Serb populace (estimated to constitute between 5 and 10 percent of all Kosovo’s residents) has refused to participate in the new regime, regarding Belgrade as the rightful seat of government. Although UNMIK has been winding down, it retains a significant role and in 2008 was joined by two new international missions, an EU rule-of-law mission and an International Civilian Representative who would oversee further political reform and also act as the European Union’s Special Representative (EUSR) in Kosovo.

The task of achieving stability and democracy in Kosovo thus remains complex, with many challenges, multiple actors whose roles can overlap, and no consensus among Kosovo’s communities regarding the direction that change should take. Nearly a decade of international governance has provided Kosovo with the core structures of a democratic regime, but continuing domestic problems and sustained international intervention limit the scope for genuine democratic governance. Kosovo must overcome a formidable array of internal social and political problems while also gaining full independence from international oversight before it can fully achieve healthy democratic rule.

Given the decades of intercommunal division in the territory, meeting these challenges will not be easy. Kosovo’s recent political history revolves around one issue more than any other: political status. Serbia claims Kosovo as part of its own territory even though ethnic-Albanian Kosovars, who make up nine-tenths of the populace, have always resisted rule from Belgrade. Yugoslavia’s communist strongman Josip Broz Tito (d. 1980) treated Kosovo as an autonomous province. When Slobodan Milošević (d. 2006) became Serbia’s president in 1989, he revoked this status and sought to reassert Serb authority. In response, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) formed under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova in order to spearhead a nonviolent campaign for independence. The LDK made little headway, however, and in 1996 a new paramilitary group, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), began attacking Serbian troops within Kosovo. Full-scale conflict broke out in 1998, and Serbian forces deployed in Kosovo not only engaged the KLA but also inflicted heavy civilian casualties in Albanian areas, leading to significant refugee flows.

Serbia’s actions drew broad international condemnation, and after efforts to broker a ceasefire failed to win Belgrade’s assent, NATO began a high-altitude bombing campaign in March 1999 to force Serbia out of Kosovo. The air war went on for 78 days, until Belgrade agreed to pull out all Serbian forces (paramilitary and police as well as military) and to allow an international presence, both civil and military, in Kosovo.
Consequently, on June 10 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1244, which set up UNMIK and gave full executive and legislative authority in Kosovo to the mission head, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG). To complement UNMIK, an armed NATO force (KFOR) went in to oversee the withdrawal of Serbian forces and provide security for the populace and the international presence.

The international mission had a broad range of goals, including not only such security basics as troop withdrawal and demilitarization, but also explicitly political responsibilities. In particular, while the question of Kosovo’s final status was essentially frozen, UNMIK was mandated to promote “the establishment of substantial autonomy and self-government” by holding elections and overseeing the development of new institutions of “democratic and autonomous self-government.” As a result, the international mission would take the lead in guiding Kosovo’s political development, working alongside local actors but often acting unilaterally when officials deemed it necessary. At the local level, UNMIK had to deal not only with the LDK, but also a growing number of new political parties. In particular, two successor parties to the disbanded KLA made a significant political impact. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) was formed in the immediate aftermath of the conflict by senior KLA leader Hashim Thaçi, while in May 2000 a second party was created when a former KLA commander, Ramush Haradinaj, established the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK).

**Building a Democratic Regime**

The international administration mission established in Kosovo in 1999 was not unique: The UN dispatched a similar mission to East Timor (now Timor-Leste) as it emerged from Indonesian occupation that same year, and there is a long history of international governance in weakly governed or disputed territories. In recent years, large international administration missions have tended to share a range of goals, including the establishment of peace and security, the strengthening of the rule of law, and economic reconstruction. Additionally, democratization has been a common objective of international actors, and periods of international administration thus often become periods of attempted regime change as well, with international administrators pursuing a policy of “democratic-regime building.”

These regime-building efforts go beyond conventional democracy promotion, for they give international actors broad executive authority and political roles usually held by locals. International administrators often wield powers that are normally beyond the reach of external actors, and thus become key players in the process of regime change. For example, international authorities can set the conditions for their own withdrawal, and in so doing can place specific boundaries on the domestic political
agenda. Administrators can also veto actions by local politicians and impose other measures instead. The issues involved may be relatively technical, but can also affect matters as far-reaching as the design of basic political institutions.

Yet international efforts do not easily translate into significant democratic development on the ground, not least because these efforts are usually made where states have failed or been gravely weakened, often in the wake of an armed conflict. While the presence of international administrators may block the most undemocratic outcomes and help to ensure that the structures of a democratic regime are established, these outside actors cannot themselves guarantee that a democratic transition will succeed or be sustained. International governance itself has risks and drawbacks: Rule by unelected foreign figures may breed resentment or dependency (or both). Successful transition ultimately requires committed local elites and favorable domestic structures that international actors cannot simply will into being. Kosovo’s recent experience highlights many of the promises and limits of the international approach. Years of international intervention there have helped Kosovo to achieve significant democratic development, but at the same time it can by no stretch be called a robust and sustainable democracy.

Nonetheless, the UN mission has had a profound impact on politics in Kosovo. UNMIK played a central role in political development after 1999, and in many ways the international administrators can be seen as coauthors of the regime transition that has taken place in subsequent years. Over the past decade, the UN mission has created institutions of local governance, overseen a series of elections, and done much to determine the political agenda and set the pace and direction of political development. Early on, UNMIK sought full control and created nothing but limited, interim local institutions. The only consultative forum, the Kosovo Transitional Council (KTC), had a membership appointed by UNMIK and few powers of its own. In response to the resulting criticism from leading Kosovars, UNMIK in late 1999 created a Joint Interim Administrative Structure. This more closely resembled a conventional government, boasting twenty administrative departments and a new executive body, the Interim Administrative Council (IAC). Nonetheless, authority in all areas of political life in Kosovo still lay unequivocally with the UN’s special representative, and while the KTC and the IAC could make recommendations and suggest policy, in practice much of the initiative still rested with UNMIK officials.
Growing dissatisfaction led to greater devolution of power in 2001, when international and domestic officials held negotiations over a more permanent and authoritative set of domestic political institutions. The leading politicians from Kosovo’s Albanian community wanted a full constitution. Yet international concerns that this might prejudice the resolution of Kosovo’s controversial political status meant that the negotiations would be allowed to lead only to a “constitutional framework” rather than a full-fledged constitution. This framework featured a directly elected unicameral assembly and an indirectly elected one-person presidency. The talks fell short of full consensus, however, and several senior Kosovar politicians refused to endorse the final package.

Several points remained in dispute. Among them were the questions of a timetable for UN withdrawal (there was none) and the absence of any provision for an independence referendum, as well as UNMIK’s insistence on retaining full and exclusive control over external relations and matters of law and order. Highlighting the international administrators’ remarkable power to impose key political outcomes, the SRSG (at that time the post was held by a former Danish cabinet minister named Hans Hakkerup) signed the framework into law on 15 May 2001. A similar process had been playing out in the electoral arena as well: When Kosovo’s parties could not agree on election rules in 2000 and 2001, international preferences ruled instead, deciding all open questions. Thus the international mission introduced its preferred electoral rules—calling for a proportional-representation (PR) system based on open lists—despite a lack of consensus among locals. As with the constitutional framework, the absence of full domestic consensus had been set aside, and international officials made the key decisions.1

Once the new Provisional Institutions of Self-Government were in place, they paved the way for the first Kosovo-wide elections in October 2001 (municipal elections had been held in 2000). Rugova’s LDK won 45 percent of the vote and joined the PDK and AAK in a grand coalition of Kosovo Albanian parties for a three-year term in office. The results were also notable for the strong showing of the Kosovo Serb grouping known as Coalition Return (named after its central goal of securing the return of all Serbs displaced from Kosovo after the 1999 NATO campaign), which polled 11.3 percent of the vote. These elections have since been followed by two further sets of Kosovo-wide elections that have led to two new governments. The first alternation in power took place after the 2004 elections, when the LDK and AAK gained enough seats to take power without the PDK. Although the PDK was unhappy to be shut out and international authorities pressed to save the grand coalition, the LDK and the AAK forged ahead and formed the government by themselves. The ethnic-Serb population boycotted the voting this time, as it would again in the third Kosovo-wide poll, held in 2007.

This most recent balloting for the Assembly of Kosovo shook up the
party system just months before independence was declared. The LDK, suffering its first electoral setback, found that it was no longer Kosovo’s largest party. Ibrahim Rugova had died while serving as Kosovo’s president in 2006, and both his loss and the struggle over who would succeed him as party leader had hurt the LDK badly. From a 2001 highwater mark of just under 360,000 votes, its vote total had shrunk below 130,000. Its vote share, meanwhile, had more than halved between 2004 and 2007, plummeting from 45.4 percent in the former year to 22.6 percent in the latter. By contrast, the PDK increased its vote from 28.9 percent to 34.3 percent over the same period to become Kosovo’s largest party. In the wake of the elections, the PDK led the way in coalition talks. Despite their former rivalry, the two parties agreed to form a new government with former KLA leader Hashim Thaçi as the new PDK premier and the LDK incumbent, Fatmir Sejdiu, continuing as president.

Since 2001, Kosovo’s own elected officials have been “cohabiting” with international administrators. In general, this relationship has worked well, and neither side has sought seriously to undermine the other. Yet tensions have persisted as locals and internationals have at times pursued separate agendas. In the Kosovo Assembly’s early days, it often clashed with UNMIK officials over the limits to its powers. On several occasions the UN special representative declared an Assembly resolution “null and void,” and when the Assembly in 2003 and 2004 tried unilaterally to amend the constitutional framework, UNMIK rejected the proposed changes.

UNMIK also frustrated domestic actors by seeking to control the political agenda, most notably through its policy of “standards before status.” This strategy, introduced in 2002, linked the resolution of Kosovo’s political status to progress toward meeting a series of internationally specified benchmarks that included functioning democratic institutions, the rule of law, freedom of movement, and the return and reintegration of refugees and displaced persons. In November 2003, UNMIK announced that sufficient progress on standards could lead to the opening of political-status talks after mid-2005. As a result, the standards process dominated Kosovo’s political life until the status talks began in early 2006, and political development was geared to meeting UNMIK’s specifications. Despite Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, UNMIK continues to report on progress toward meeting key benchmarks, and the standards process remains a major feature of politics. In 2006, the UN standards were folded into an EU Partnership Action Plan for Kosovo that sets out a series of reform targets and entails annual EU compliance reports. Through all this, the standards process has not lacked for critics. Detractors charge that its targets are unreasonable, and blame it for causing what they see as destabilizing delays in the settling of the status issue—delays whose most serious consequence so far has been the wave of anti-Serb violence that broke out in March 2004. Moreover, critics
complain, the standards are thinly rooted, with progress coming mainly in the form of laws crafted (with much international help) to meet technical requirements, but with too little in the way of home-grown support from voters or follow-through by Kosovo’s executive branch.

The Road to Independence

Although the standards process was controversial and locals never fully embraced it, in 2005 the UN decided to start talks on Kosovo’s political status. The UN review leading to this decision highlighted many areas that needed work, especially in the realm of protecting minority rights, but acknowledged that putting off the status question had led to widespread frustration, and suggested that continued postponement would lead to greater instability. As a result, the status talks began in early 2006, before all the standards had been fully met. The UN special envoy, former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, oversaw months of shuttle diplomacy between Priština and Belgrade as well as face-to-face negotiations between Kosovo Albanian and Serb officials.

Yet there proved to be little room for compromise between the mutually exclusive options to which each side firmly held: full independence for Kosovo or substantial autonomy within Serbia. The talks ended in deadlock. Ahtisaari’s report urged the UN to resolve the status issue unilaterally, and recommended for Kosovo “independence, supervised by the international community.” His plan included extensive provisions for the protection of Serb minorities in an independent Kosovo, including a process of decentralization and redistricting meant to ensure that most Serbs would live in majority-Serb municipalities. Crucially, the plan also proposed that UNMIK should disband, with the EU stepping in to take the lead. Serbia and Russia vehemently opposed Ahtisaari’s ideas, and Moscow used a veto threat in the UN Security Council to ensure that no resolution authorizing the new international mission to Kosovo would gain approval. In August, a new round of internationally mediated talks commenced with a UN-set deadline of 10 December 2007, but again they failed to lead to any agreement between the sides.

In the face of this impasse, Kosovo drew tacit support from Washington and several European donors for its February 2008 independence declaration. In the declaration itself, the Assembly of Kosovo pledges to implement Ahtisaari’s plan in full. Accordingly, among newly independent Kosovo’s first acts was acceptance of an EU rule-of-law mission (known as EULEX) to provide support and oversight in the security and judicial sectors, and an International Civilian Representative who would oversee implementation of the Ahtisaari plan and act as the EU’s Special Representative in Kosovo. Both EULEX and the special representative possess a range of executive powers, though in neither case do these reach the level of authority that UNMIK and its chief enjoyed.
As these developments have unfolded, Belgrade and Moscow have continued their campaign against independence or anything that might assist its realization. Russia has heavily lobbied the UN to keep UNMIK in Kosovo, and the smooth transition from UN to EU leadership envisaged in the Ahtisaari Plan failed to materialize. Tensions between the international missions mounted, and it was only after a November 2008 agreement to “reconfigure” the international presence that EULEX was able to deploy its staff, albeit under a status-neutral “UN umbrella.” Thus have the events of 2008, coming after almost a decade of international governance in Kosovo, made it clear that international authorities will be staying for years to come. While many of the objectives of the initial intervention have long been achieved, concerns remain about security, the rule of law, and the protection of minorities.

**Kosovo’s Democratic Quality**

Democracy at its most basic requires free, fair, and competitive elections; full adult suffrage; a wide range of political freedoms; and government autonomy from outside influence. Leonardo Morlino further defines a good democracy as “a stable institutional structure that realizes the liberty and equality of citizens through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms.” Such a regime, he explains, must constitute a legitimized political system that satisfies its citizens, provides liberty and equality, and permits the public to evaluate how the government is performing and to hold it to account. By these yardsticks, Kosovo’s newly declared state has achieved much. Yet it still falls far short of the democratic ideal and displays features which suggest that it will take some time before Kosovo can be described as a robust or “good” democracy.

The achievements made under UNMIK’s auspices have been considerable. Beginning in 2000, full adult suffrage was granted in a series of free and fair elections at both the local and Kosovo-wide levels. There is real multiparty competition: Three sets of central elections have led to alternations in power among three separate governing coalitions. Despite the postconflict setting, radical ultranationalist parties have a combined vote share that has never risen above a minuscule 2 percent. The leaders of all the major parties generally express moderate views on intercommunal relations and frequently stress that Kosovo is a multiethnic society in which the Serb minority has an important place. Senior Kosovo Albanian politicians have visited Serb-majority enclaves in efforts to build confidence in the Priština government.

The need to promote minorities’ participation and guard their rights has received serious attention. The 2008 Constitution sets aside a sixth of the 120 seats in the Assembly for minorities (ten seats for Serbs and ten for non-Serbs), and requires as well that two of the Assembly’s five deputy-presidents be from minority groups. Proposed laws affecting such
“vital interests” as language, education, and communal symbols must win concurrent majorities in order to pass: Not only must a majority of the Assembly as a whole vote in favor, but so must a majority of those legislators who represent the minority communities. Repeal of any law in these areas likewise requires concurrent-majority consent. Cabinet posts are set aside too, with at least one Serb and one non-Serb minority minister constitutionally required. Similar forms of guaranteed minority representation obtain in the courts and local governing bodies. In addition, no constitutional change can pass unless two-thirds of the Assembly votes for it, and that two-thirds must include two-thirds of the minority-community representatives.

Kosovo has vibrant independent media, and civil society is gaining strength and beginning to exert greater influence on government. Kosovo has also been more proactive in cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) than some of its Balkan neighbors. In 2005, the ICTY indicted AAK leader Ramush Haradinaj, who was then serving as prime minister, for crimes committed against Serbs while he was a KLA commander. Haradinaj immediately resigned, publicly urged calm, and surrendered peacefully to the Hague authorities. He was released pending the full trial, and his cooperation with authorities won him permission to resume a role in politics. In March 2008, the ICTY acquitted him for lack of evidence. The Tribunal’s ruling, however, stated that there had been problems in getting witnesses to testify, and prosecutors began lodging appeals. Citing the unstable security situation in Kosovo, the judges contended that the trial had been held in an atmosphere which made witnesses feel unsafe.

As the events around the Haradinaj trial suggest, Kosovo remains a deeply divided society with serious intercommunal problems. While the structures of democracy have been established, and many of its practices entrenched, key features associated with genuine democratic rule are missing. The conflict’s most damaging legacy is the almost total social and political segregation of the Albanian and Serb communities. The party system contains only parties that represent one ethnic community or the other; no party spans the communal divide. The Serb community has boycotted Kosovo’s political institutions and every election except for the 2001 Assembly balloting. A sense that the government is legitimate—a central ingredient of democratic quality—is missing among Kosovo’s Serb population. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have written about the damage that such problems of “stateness” can do to efforts at democratic transition and consolidation. Kosovo clearly exhibits the key stateness-related obstacles that they identify: fundamental societal differences over both the boundaries of the territorial political entity (the polity) and the identity of those belonging to the political community (the demos).

To go with their boycott, Kosovo’s Serbs have established parallel political structures in those parts of Kosovo (mostly in the north) where Serbs predominate. The Serbian government funds these structures, and
Belgrade pressures Kosovo Serbs to use and staff the parallel institutions rather than anything sponsored by Priština. The Serbian-backed structures include Serbian police in northern Kosovo, separate Serb-run courts, and health-care and educational facilities funded directly by the Serbian state. Kosovo’s decision to declare independence sparked a strengthening of these institutions, which in June 2008 were joined by an unofficial Kosovo Serb Assembly that meets within the Serb enclave in Mitrovica, a divided town in northern Kosovo.

The geographical and social separation of Kosovo’s Serb and Albanian populations is also stark. In addition to the large concentration of Serbs in the north, there are isolated Serb enclaves across the south. Freedom of movement remains a problem, and some Serbs, especially in the south, limit their travels around Kosovo. Illegal occupation of Serb-owned houses by Kosovo Albanians is a practice that, despite recent government legislation, local Albanian leaders too often facilitate. An estimated 150,000 Serbs fled Kosovo after Serbian forces withdrew in mid-1999, and Albanians turned on Serbs in a widespread pattern of revenge violence. The UN estimates that since 2000, only 17,000 displaced members of minority groups have returned to Kosovo, with unresolved property disputes and security concerns remaining key factors.

Large-scale intercommunal violence has been rare, but a wave of anti-Serb attacks in March 2004 has left lingering fear and bitterness. Rumors that Serb intimidation had led to the drowning of three Kosovo Albanian children sparked two days of large-scale riots and coordinated attacks on Serb areas throughout Kosovo. Nineteen people were killed, nearly a thousand injured, and more than four-thousand Serbs displaced. The riots highlighted the fragility of the security situation at the time, and the slack police and judicial response to them raised doubts about the rule of law. Police officers and prosecutors often lodged charges that failed to correspond with the severity of the crimes, and judges handed down excessively lenient sentences. Witnesses, whether Serbs terrified of reprisals or Albanians sympathetic to the accused, often refused to testify. The OSCE has noted that more than 50,000 people (including many members of the Kosovo Police Service) are thought to have taken part in the violence, but as of 2008 only about 400 persons had faced prosecution, with around three-quarters convicted. Since 2004, violence has become rarer, although a protest against independence in a Serb enclave did lead to the death of an UNMIK police officer in 2008.

Continuing worries about whether law rules Kosovo have led to international jurists staying on to run courts deep into the postconflict period. Corruption is also a major problem and undermines efforts to develop the rule of law throughout the political system. Handing out official posts on the basis of personal or political ties remains a common practice. Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer recently listed Kosovo as one of the ten countries in the world most affected by bribery.
Aside from domestic challenges, Kosovo’s democracy is also dependent on international forces that are beyond its control. Whatever Kosovo Albanians may wish, Belgrade remains a major player in Kosovo’s politics, and Serbian policies will be influencing the political agenda in Priština for some time to come. Although the Serbian government that came to power in 2008 is pro-European and less vociferously nationalist than previous administrations, it nonetheless insists (like all Serbian governments before it) that Kosovo is part of Serbia. President Boris Tadić and Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković both have committed themselves to this line and have signaled their support for the parallel institutions in northern Kosovo, including the Mitrovica-based assembly.

Crucially, Kosovo also remains subject to administration by international authorities. UNMIK has carved out a new role in the post-independence period and now coexists with the two newer EU entities. The former now exerts a fraction of the authority that it once did, and to date the EU offices have refrained from any intrusive use of their executive powers. Nonetheless, the international missions retain rights to extensive legislative and executive authority, and Kosovo’s elected government thus coexists with centers of power that are closed to the channels of representation and accountability normally present in a democracy. Tension between UNMIK and the newer entities over their relative powers and duties is further frustrating the democratic prospect in Kosovo. It is no small challenge for Kosovo’s government to assert due autonomy and democratic legitimacy in this context of continued international involvement in what, under normal circumstances, would be its own domestic affairs.

Conditional Independence, Conditional Democracy

Hopes for democracy in Kosovo depend on two things: the attainment of political independence from external administrators and further political progress at the domestic level. While much has been achieved since 1999, the experience of democratic regime-building has been far from an unqualified success, and UNMIK’s record in promoting democratic development in Kosovo has been mixed.

To a large extent, the presence of UNMIK after 1999 helped to reduce uncertainty during the transition phase and ensured that the transition favored democratic development rather than authoritarian retrenchment. The UN mission also successfully established domestic institutions of self-government and administered a series of free and fair democratic elections. Yet the course of political development in Kosovo has not run smooth, and the transition since 1999 has been marked by significant instances of international imposition as well as international and domestic cooperation. UNMIK used conditionality extensively, making both its own withdrawal and talks on Kosovo’s status contingent on progress toward
a set of internationally specified benchmarks, with special reference to minority protection. This resulted in an extensive institutional and legislative framework supporting Kosovo’s minority communities, but one that has not been accompanied by similar levels of government implementation or commitment at the local level.

Issues of minority rights continue to be a concern, with limitations on freedom of movement and perceptions of insecurity restricting political space for the Serb minority. The sustained Serb political boycott and the continued existence of parallel Serb-run institutions further suggest a profound rejection of the legitimacy of the Kosovo government within the Serb community, raising serious questions about the viability of a multiethnic democracy within a unified Kosovo. Kosovo’s institutions remain weak, and the institutional structures of government and administration remain unable, and at times unwilling, to maintain the rule of law throughout the territory, not least by ensuring that all members of the political community are treated equally and have equal access to the legal and political system.

International authorities have had extensive responsibilities in these areas, and the continuing problems partly reflect the limits of democratic regime-building in postconflict settings. Yet not only international failures, but the views and policies of domestic actors, have frustrated progress. Consequently, while a reformed international presence in Kosovo may facilitate future improvements, significant forward movement will not come without the cooperation and commitment of Kosovo’s divided political communities.

The months since independence was declared have brought both promising and troubling signs. Kosovo’s government has sought to promote the newly declared state as an inclusive and multiethnic one, and the new constitution makes permanent a wide range of minority protections originally introduced under UN auspices. But the declaration itself inflamed the Serb community, whose angry reaction ruled out any prospect of a smooth transition to a stable, multiethnic, and unified Kosovo state. The Kosovo authorities have in turn refused to renew negotiations with Belgrade on a number of issues of mutual interest, including police and judicial arrangements, that the UN wants to see settled.

Furthermore, the continued oversight exercised by outside powers unavoidably takes a toll on the democratic quality of domestic institutions. UNMIK’s current role in Kosovo is a shadow of what it once was,
and many of the powers that it assumed in 1999 now belong to domestic authorities. In September 2007, the UN secretary-general stated that UNMIK had largely achieved what it could. Kosovo’s subsequent declaration of independence and the arrival of the EU missions further suggested that UNMIK’s days were numbered. Yet the tangled international diplomacy surrounding Kosovo’s political status has meant that the UN has continued to play a significant role in domestic affairs. Russian insistence on adherence to UNMIK’s founding Resolution 1244, which acknowledges the territorial integrity of the former Yugoslavia (now taken effectively to mean Serbia), requires Kosovo to host three separate and uneasily coexisting international offices, each of which enjoys some form of executive authority even as it lacks the capacity for representation and accountability that is a crucial aspect of democratic relations between governors and those whom they govern.

In a fully independent Kosovo, with proper domestic institutions in place and in charge, the potential for genuinely democratic self-rule will be considerable. Yet even then, domestic institutions and domestic actors will have to conquer stubborn challenges if Kosovo is to develop a stable and sustainable democratic political system. Democratic regime-building “from outside” has contributed to Kosovo’s progress to date, but its contribution is inherently limited. Successful democratization requires domestic rather than international commitment, and Kosovo’s long-term prospects will thus only be known once international administrators withdraw and Kosovo’s Serb and Albanian communities are given the opportunity to decide their own collective fate. Although Kosovo now has many of the political structures necessary to achieve democracy in a plural society, the profound gulf between the Serb and Albanian populations means that sustainable political accommodation remains a distant goal.

NOTES


3. Results from the Kosovo Central Election Commission are available at www.osce.org.

4. Author’s interviews with senior UNMIK officials, Priština, Kosovo, April 2005.


