

Protesters Attack U.S. Embassy in Belgrade

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BELGRADE — Demonstrators attacked the United States Embassy and set part of it ablaze Thursday as tens of thousands of angry Serbs took to the streets of Belgrade to protest Kosovo's declaration of independence.

Witnesses said that at least 100 people broke into the Embassy and torched some of its rooms. One protester was able to rip the American flag from the facade of the building. An estimated 1,000 demonstrators cheered as the vandals, some wearing masks to conceal their faces, jumped onto the building's balcony waving a Serbian flag and chanting 'Serbia, Serbia!' the witnesses said. A convoy of police firing tear gas was able to disperse the crowd.

The Associated Press reported that the small fires at the Embassy were quickly extinguished by firefighters.

The United States recognized Kosovo on Monday, one day after Kosovo declared its independence.

Serbian television reported that the Croatian Embassy had also been attacked and the state news agency said the Bosnian and Turkish Embassies were also targeted. Emergency services said that at least 30 people had been injured in the incidents, half of them police. Security sources estimated that 150,000 people joined the protests.

Witnesses said that a McDonald's restaurant near the center of Belgrade was ransacked by protesters.

The United States Embassy had been closed since Sunday after it was targeted by demonstrators and employees had been told to stay home. A State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, on Thursday urged the Serbian government to protect the Embassy, the Associated Press reported. He said the ambassador was at his home and was in contact with American officials.

The violence fueled growing fears in Washington and Brussels that Serbia was turning to the virulent nationalism of the past.

But Serbian analysts predicted the country would ultimately embrace the West as it came to terms with losing its medieval heartland.

In recent days, Western leaders have looked on with growing alarm as Serbia's hard-line Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, who helped lead the revolution that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, has replicated the nationalist rhetoric of the late dictator,

who used Serbs' outrage that their ancestral heartland was dominated by Muslim Albanians to come to power in Serbia.

"As long as we live, Kosovo is Serbia," Mr. Kostunica told the crowd in Belgrade, who thronged next to the old Yugoslav Parliament building chanting patriotic songs. "We're not alone in our fight. President Putin is with us."

In a sign of the divisions within Serbia's government, the pro-Western President Boris Tadic was conspicuously absent from the rally, on a state visit to Romania.

Yet for all the hostility in a country seeming to turn inward on itself, Serbian political observers and Balkan experts predicted that the despair over the loss of Kosovo would eventually subside. They said economics would overcome emotions as a majority of Serbs came to realize that mooring Serbia to the European Union was the only way the country could prosper.

"The protests will allow Serbian nationalism and anger over the loss of Kosovo to vent itself," said Misha Glenny, a prominent London-based Balkan expert. "Kosovo's independence has made Serbia's European path more difficult, but life will go on, and attaching Serbia to the European Union will remain the dominant opinion inside the country."

Western diplomats said their hope for a moderate, outward-looking Serbia had been buttressed by the recent re-election of Mr. Tadic, who campaigned on the argument that holding on to Kosovo did not justify sacrificing Serbia's future in Europe.

Their optimism, however, was tempered by the strong election showing for Mr. Tadic's opponent, Tomislav Nikolic, a far-right nationalist who has exploited Serbs' discontent over Kosovo by arguing that Serbia should reject Europe and look to Moscow and China instead.

But while Moscow has gained in popularity in Serbia by blocking Kosovo's integration into the international community, leading Serbian intellectuals said most Serbs realized that the Kremlin's willingness to fight for their cause was limited and driven by self-interest.

"Russia wasn't there to help Serbs during the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, it wasn't there to help Serbs in 1999 during the NATO bombing and most people realize it will not go that far now," said Zoran Dogramadziev, a leading Serbian writer.

In the short term, analysts said an anti-European Union backlash would gain force following the West's support for an independent Kosovo. But Marko Blagojevic, an analyst with the Center for Democracy and Free Elections in Belgrade and a leading pollster, stressed that recent polls showed that 65 per cent of Serbs saw their future in the European Union.

Mr. Blagojevic said he did not believe this had drastically changed. He noted that only about 10 percent of Serbs supported going to war over Kosovo, and many were pensioners and housewives.

Serbian analysts said that rather than reflecting a resurgence of dangerous nationalism, the protests over Kosovo reflected disenchantment by the "losers of the transition" —

those Serbs who have not benefited from the country's democratic transformation during the eight years since Mr. Milosevic fell.

Unemployment hovers at about 21 per cent, while the country's annual per capita gross domestic product of about \$7,400 has made Serbia one of Europe's poorest countries.

Without European Union membership, Serbs do not enjoy the open borders of their neighbors. Many Serbs say they feel isolated and closed in.

Yet many of the younger generation, hungry for flashy cars and for the European Union visas that would help them see the world, say they would happily trade poor, landlocked Kosovo for better jobs and economic security.

"For my generation, the opportunity to have a good life is far more important than this piece of land," said Aleksandar Obradovic, a 23-year-old political scientist from Belgrade who did not protest on Thursday and, like many Serbs, has never set foot in Kosovo.

Sociologists and historians say the difficulty for Serbs in coming to terms with Kosovo's independence also reflected the need for Serbia to engage in a historical reckoning about the past. During the 1998-1999 conflict, when Mr. Milosevic's repression of ethnic Albanians prompted NATO to intervene, an estimated 10,000 people were killed, many of them Albanians. Nearly 1,500 Serbs were killed in revenge killings that followed.

Svetlana Ivanovic, a 29-year-old student from Belgrade, said that until lately the events of the war had been largely glossed over in history lessons and in the media. But when she recently saw a documentary about the Balkan wars of the 1990s on Serbian television, she added, it reinforced her feelings that the Albanians had a right to self-determination. "When I saw what we had done to the Albanians, I began to cry and was very sad," she said. "I believe that we should let Kosovo go."

Dan Bilefsky reported from Pristina, Kosovo..