

### **New Statehoods on the Balkans: towards a common European Future for Kosovo and Serbia?**<sup>1</sup>

*On Sunday 17 February 2008 Kosovo will probably declare its independence. Years of mediated negotiations between the Kosovar side and Serbia have not led to a common solution of the conflict. On Monday, the EU foreign ministers may agree that conditions for recognition have been met and the majority of EU member states are expected to recognise an independent Kosovo very soon. Serbia has declared to annul Kosovo's statehood in advance. Tension between Serbia and Kosovo seems inevitable. Still, in the long run, Kosovo and Serbia depend on each other. Is a common EU perspective a solution for the future?*<sup>2</sup>

There is no alternative for Serbia to a European Union perspective. It is the only way for Serbia to become a modern, stable country with strong institutions and prosperity in the future. Unfortunately, the last days have shown, that in Serbia the anti-modern and anti-European forces are stronger than they were under the previous regime. Kosovo is a defeat for Serbia and it is not its first defeat. It is hopefully the last. Kosovo is also the most painful defeat. People are very emotional about it, because it is closer than the previous defeats, but this defeat is the result of pursuing the wrong policy in the previous period. Serbia needs to face this and it will take a lot of courage to change its policy. Every nation that is going through what Serbia is going through today would act in similar ways, including calling on international law. But Serbia was blind to international law in the past in so many cases that it has given the international community many occasions to refer to Serbia's international duties in the whole region or the cooperation with ICTY and other obligations that Serbia needed to fulfill. The only perspective for Serbia is to change internally. It needs to look towards the future, its integration into Europe.

Both, Kosovo and Serbia, have to respect the values the EU stands for, including human rights: this is the only way a reconciliation can happen. The whole region has to do this in a parallel and coordinated process. Also, the markets are too small by themselves - they have to connect. They are not competitive and not attractive for investors. The only solution is to make one common market which then can enter the market of the EU.

People in the region share many problems: unemployment, corruption, weak institutions, a weak judiciary system and limited media freedom. If politicians and media would let the people see how many problems they have in common and how many similarities they have, this would be a huge step in the reconciliation process. Serbia needs help from the European Union, because nationalist forces are trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Guest speakers were: **Jovana Tavcar**, Member Political Council of the Liberaldemocratic Party, **Oliver Ivanovic**, Head of the Serbian List for Kosmet and **Bujar Bukoshi**, Member of the Kosovo Parliament (Liberaldemocratic Party). The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> The debate took place on 27 February 2008. The introductory questions relate to the situation at the time.

force it on an anti-European track. Before the Kosovo-issue, there was the Montenegro-issue, the only period when there was a pro-European course was under Gincic. These were only three years. Kustonica used Kosovo as a means to get Serbia off the European track.

### **Kosovo Serbs and Serbia**

The current government in Belgrade is a derelict of the Milosevic period. The secret services are still not reformed. Serbia missed many chances during the negotiation process of the last two years. The Serbian government did not think about the people and help Serbs in Kosovo by sending them a message to integrate in the institutions and by asking the international community for special attention for Serbian municipalities. They exclusively focused on the territorial question. They used the territory and the status question to create the atmosphere we are witnessing today in Belgrade. They knew the outcome - that the territory would be gone- and yet they did not help the Kosovo Serbs to integrate. The official Belgrade point of view has to be changed. Belgrade sent the message to Kosovo Serbs to not go into the institutions without asking the question what that means. And the Serbs who came to Serbia as refugees are not institutionally supported either.

The gap between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs is deepening. The Kosovo institutions have been perceived by the Kosovo Serbs as Albanian and that voice is even louder now. In the last elections some Serbs participated. They got ten seats and now they are quitting or wondering what to do. The government in Prishtina has a strong (Albanian) basis. They have made a lot of promises which will be difficult to fulfill.

Most (Serbian) demonstrations are peaceful at the time, but it is doubtful how long that will go on. Many attempts to reconcile the North of Kosovo with the South have failed. There is a good reason for this. Between 5.000 – 6.000 IDPs (internally displaced persons) live in the North of Kosovo. It is unacceptable to set them out of their homes and send them to Serbia. The division between Serbs and Albanians will grow. The Serbs in the rest of Kosovo feel left alone. They feel the Serbian state is deserting them. They start wondering how to leave Kosovo. June will be a crucial month. At the end of the school year people will decide whether they will leave their kids there during the summer and if they are going to register them in September. This time less parents will be willing to do that. They will start selling their houses. Everybody seems to be very keen on having the Kosovo Serbs staying there, but they are leaving. There is a lack of trust. They do not trust the Kosovar Albanians. Serbs do not trust the international forces either. KFOR did not even try to protect the Kosovo Serbs. In 1999, there was no justice, nobody ever got caught.<sup>3</sup> Even if Kosovo after independence would immediately become a member of the EU – no Kosovan Serb would accept it. So far, Serbia has not taken the measures everybody was afraid of: to cut the energy supply, the water and to impose economic sanctions. Whatever you may think about the Serbia government – they are pragmatic people. If they cut the energy – they will be in conflict with the Balkan network. That is not a

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<sup>3</sup> In 1999, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) whose co-leader was the present-day prime minister of Kosovo Hashim Thaci allegedly kidnapped 300 young Serbian men, transported them to Albania and had there their internal organs removed and sold to international traffickers. These allegations are referred to in Carla del Ponte's autobiographical book "The Hunt".

good idea, because Serbia sometimes needs additional supply. Serbia knows that if they cut the water, they are cutting life and they are aware of the fact that if you put someone with the back against the wall you can expect a lot of trouble. This is why Serbia did not take any of these measures. History shows that whenever Serbia was put with its back to the wall, it has always meant trouble for the Balkans. This also means that Serbia should not be pushed too hard. Part of Serbia is nationalistic (not necessarily anti-democratic) – the other is pro-European, but not necessarily less nationalistic. Apart from the 5% who voted for the Liberal Democratic Party, nobody in Serbia was in favour of Kosovo's independence. And even they didn't say it that way. They said: we accept reality and reality is that Kosovo is going to be independent. Against this background it has to be expected that Kosovo will remain in permanent instability. It has weak institutions: they cannot improve very much so soon after the declaration of independence. For too long the status question was used as an excuse for not doing anything in terms of strengthening the institutions.

### **Europe**

What can Europe do now? Kosovo needs supervision – it cannot do it alone. After a few months the Kosovo Albanians will stop celebrating...there is no work, a low educational level and a weak economy. Kosovo cannot survive on donations! Young Albanians and Serbians will go to the Western countries, especially the Nordic countries and new EU member states like Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, together. One should try to find an organized manner to bring them there – if they do not immigrate in an organized manner, they will be uncontrollable.

Some 20 countries have recognized Kosovo so far. Kosovo's independence is a serious challenge for the EU: the EU mission in Kosovo is going to be the biggest field operation the European Union has ever put on the ground. Specialist EU police officers will be working alongside Kosovo police counterparts and will help prevent discrimination. The Ahtisaari plan has detailed mechanisms for the protection of minorities and there will be a huge international presence in Kosovo. Even if Albanians wanted to take actions against the Serbs they couldn't.

There will be EU judges and prosecutors. The danger is that Belgrade keeps misusing the Kosovo Serbs. Thousands of them are still living in collective centres in Serbia since 1999 and there is no real interest of Serbia to improve their lives. We can only hope that Kosovo Serbs who still live in Kosovo will be brave enough to withdraw from Serbian pressure and they consider Kosovo their place of origin and their home. Belgrade is violating the human rights of the Kosovo Serbs by not letting them freely decide on their future. The Albanians must now take the responsibility by offering minority rights to the Serbs, but cannot be expected embracing them right away because the recent genocide left scars.

Since the 90s, the economy of Kosovo under Serbian repression has deteriorated. There is some economic recovery and political stability, but much was impeded due to the status issue. In the meantime, the population of Kosovo grows with the fastest rate of the region. The population under 25 amounts to 52%. A large mass of young people and a low economy growth create tremendous unemployment. Problems can be foreseen regarding implementation of the Ahtisaari-plan. Most problems will be due to persisting conflicting political ambitions of the parties involved. If Serbia does not cooperate, the implementation of the Ahtisaari plan will be a difficult process, certainly against the background of a possible boycott by the Kosovo Serbs.

How can we ensure economic development? If Serbia blocks it, we will have a real problem and there is Russia. Russia's newly appointed representative to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, said support for Kosovo from the European Union or NATO would give Russia the right to use its own "brute force" in future scenarios. In the long run we could end up with another frozen conflict. Also, how will we implement the Ahtisaari plan for decentralisation because it would mean that we have various systems of education etc. within one small country. We should consider a Marshall plan for the whole region.

### **Perspectives**

A huge majority of Serbs perceives the independence of Kosovo as an injustice. No one can change that perception. There is no need to manipulate the Kosovo Serbs in that respect: this is what they believe as well. This will create instability. It will be impossible to convince any credible Serb to join the Kosovo institutions. There are also many Albanians who do not trust public institutions.

The politicians from Serbia and Kosovo will have to get together and talk to each other. This is the only path to reconciliation. Mr. Tadic got his mandate, the turnout was big and he was the candidate who offered a European perspective. This shows that people in Serbia are much more responsible than the current political leadership. In the last eight years public opinion polls always showed that they strongly support the European pathway of Serbia. The EU used to have a support of 70-80%. This may now have diminished a little.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, people will sit down and do their own calculations. That is why Serbia still needs an open door at the European Union. It is the only way to stop the anti-European forces from winning. If Europe closes its door, they will be handed out a very strong argument.

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<sup>4</sup> A recent survey, commissioned by the Ministry for Kosovo and conducted by Publikum agency March 24 – April 1, shows that close to two-thirds – 63.9 percent of those who took part – are still in favour of Serbia joining the European Union. In October 2007, this number was at 71.55 percent. At the same time, 71.3 percent say it is unacceptable that the possible admission to the EU is conditioned with Serbia's recognition of the province's secession. As for the arrival of an EU mission to Kosovo, 9.93 percent of those polled say it should be accepted by Belgrade unconditionally, while 42.73 percent say it should be rejected. 34.74 percent said the mission should be accepted if it comes with the approval of the UN Security Council. See: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/society-article.php?yyyy=2008&mm=04&dd=09&nav\\_id=49259](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/society-article.php?yyyy=2008&mm=04&dd=09&nav_id=49259)