

Looking Ahead: Interethnic, Cultural and Economic Challenges

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The status of Kosovo is one of the most pressing issues of both European as well as international politics. Interethnic relations in this region have had a troubled history ever since the territory became part of Serbia in 1912. Nowadays it has by far outgrown the initial ethnic aspect and has become an issue of principle, of international law, of fairness and justice in international relations. As such, it will be a test for the capabilities of the contemporary international actors to deal with conflicts and to solve them adequately, i.e. in a way which will not open perspectives for future conflicts.

The issue of Kosovo and its political status is motivating political speech filled with big words, noble aims, or high principles – and this applies to both the Serb and Albanian side in this dispute. Kosovo Albanians insist exclusively upon acquiring independence, and declare they could not agree to anything less than that. Serbia's officials mainly deny this, and will agree under no circumstances with any solution which would imply the secession of Kosovo. Both principles – the right to self-determination on the one hand, and the principle of territorial integrity on the other, are legitimate and are recognized in international law.

So, can a sustainable solution to this dispute be found? The assessment depends to a great extent on the aim itself, since it shapes very much the perspective from which we view the problems in question. Are we, in this context, oriented more toward the human aspect or to state-building? Are we going to enhance stability with what we define as a solution? Democracy does not seem to provide for automatic solutions. The task is to find a political framework which will make possible future economic development and overall stability.

The factual situation in Kosovo is that for years now it has not been an integral part of Serbia – its political system, its legal system, its educational system were all separated from official Serbia. Inadequate policies of Serbia's (Yugoslavia's) official authorities in this province since it became a part of Serbia led to deep mistrust and dissatisfaction. Kosovo's independence may be unjust from the Serbian standpoint, but it seems like the only possible solution for generations of Albanians. It might not be fair, but otherwise it would be the result of bad politics. In this regard, it is the perceptions that count produce consequences, even if they are wrong or irrational from some other point of view.

In the context of political declarations of the most important international actors independence seems to be a rather realistic option. Some of them even see it as the only one that can preserve stability in the region – the main argument being that if independence would not be granted, there would be a risk of violence in view of expectations of reactions on part of the Kosovo Albanians. This, in itself, is not a very rational answer in this regard, particularly in view of international military presence in Kosovo.

All aspects considered, it is rather probable that the decision on Kosovo will not be final, but that it will give a wide margin for interpretation and activity. If, as many presume, Kosovo will get some sort of independence, what will this independence actually look like? Most probably, it will not be explicit for a number of predominantly political reasons:

- in order to cover at least a little the legal mess implied by such a solution, in view of the lack of clear answers to certain aspects of the problem;
- to avoid a possible crisis in Serbian society, which is not an unconceivable situation particularly in regard to the strong resistance on the part of Serbia's institutions and the entire political climate in the country with regard to this issue.

It would be good to define the solution in such a way as to enable everybody to get something and not lose everything. Each side should have something which could be presented as at least some gain, or to have a face-saving exit.

The main aim is to achieve security, not only in Kosovo itself, but also in the immediate and regional surrounding. One should have in mind only that nowadays security is not a merely military or political matter. It comprises many other aspects as well – economic, health, environmental, cultural, and certainly the issue of treatment of national minorities. And all of them make their contribution to the overall stability and security, as well as quality of life.

It will be in any case a test for the international community. It should show that it can deal with potentially threatening situations, that it can resolve conflicts by peaceful means. After all, the international community has its share of responsibility in what was going on up to now. And judged by the results achieved, the end result (i.e. the situation that we have today) does not speak very much of the powers of this international community. It is interesting to remember of some of the findings in the report of Kai Eide: this report says that in Kosovo the international community is assessed rather badly since the Kosovo Albanians see it as standing in the way of their political goals, and the Serbs see it as incapable of securing the return of so few after returning so many after the bombing campaign.

What are the consequences of such a solution for Serbia? What to do with Serbia, a country which in such a situation would be in a very difficult political situation and probably facing the danger of a new rise of nationalist forces? Serbia cannot make trade-offs, neither public nor official, nor can it agree to the solutions which affect her territorial integrity. However, Serbia must be compensated in some way in order to remove the inevitable bitterness within the population. In the overall geographic and political position of the country this is important and should not be ignored or neglected for that matter. It is a completely different aspect that a unilateral separation of Kosovo written down in an international document would probably – after the initial period – define more precisely Serbia's future and position, leaving her without this territory, but also without the economic, political and other troublesome aspects which Kosovo implies.

And there is a strategic context to this as well. The Balkans has once again become a stake in the relations between Russia and what we use to call the Western world. The West seems to have held the keys for quite some time (the bombing campaign, the subsequent organization of life in Kosovo through UNMIK and KFOR). It has the main say in the political process particularly since Russia has in a way self-withdrawn from Kosovo. But the situation actually sends a message – regardless of how strong you are, you cannot accomplish just everything. The U.S.A. is the superpower of the day, it is a strong nuclear power, it can destroy the world, but it cannot impose a solution to Iraq nor catch Bin Laden.

And, what if Kosovo gets its independence? What will we be facing in this new situation? One thing should be clear: ethnic purity, as well as separation from Serbia, will not solve the outstanding issues of the devastated land. Kosovo has always been known for its economic backwardness and in the meantime it has not become much more developed. Figures speak of 60% unemployment, and 42% of those unemployed are under 19 years old.

There is no field without challenges, and no field will be solved automatically once independence is there. Anyway, to resolve these problems it will be necessary to have concentrated international support. There is tremendous work to be done, as illustrated very well in the report of Werner Wendt, Head of the OSCE Mission in Pristina. The highest ranking priority is the development of the economic sphere and solving the problem of unemployment; simultaneously, there is the task of building state institutions, to provide for minority participation, freedom of movement (particularly for ethnic minorities), to have respect for human rights, for gender equality (54% of girls attend secondary school), to solve problems pertaining to education, like the interpretation of history, similar to some other former Yugoslav republics and first of all Bosnia-Herzegovina.

How do we settle ethnic problems at all? In the territory of the SFRY we had two almost opposite models: a complete ethnic mix (“leopard skin”) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which led to war, and complete separation in Kosovo, which did not work. When shall we ever learn? – learn to live

together, and work together, and to realize that doing things together for the benefit of all has proven to be one of the best ways to achieve general improvement?

Here there is again the point of the strategic context – the Balkans will remain a zone of influence of the main actors involved in the solution of the Kosovo issue today: Russia (due to emotional and historical ties with some parts of the region), the US (which is militarily present in Kosovo, and which in some parts of the Balkans has been a symbol, a beacon of liberty), and the EU (as the present magnet motivating countries in the region to undertake various reforms, and as the future roof for the entire region).