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**Moving Kosovo Forward:
Reality V Fiction?**

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The key request from the international community is for Serbia and the region to move forward, to start thinking about the future and to be realistic. However, while this requirement has much logic, there is little indication that the same is done in Western capitals.

The postponement of the Kosovo status decision till early 2007 was a welcome move, as it could finally signal a positive shift in thinking by the West and the realisation of Serbia's importance within the region. The whole debate over the date itself shows how divided the international community is over this issue, with various viewpoints stretching from the US insistence on 2006, to Ahtisaari's constantly changing viewpoints and, the most worrying, the UN's – as the main *de jure* actor - long overdue stance on the matter. Furthermore, Russia, as a key stake holder within the Contact Group, is not showing much sign of shifting its position and there is little reason to expect it will do so. The conciliatory gesture also comes as a last minute 'carrot' to the Serbian 'democratic' political scene. However, at the same time it indicates that the details of that decision will not be very favourable to Belgrade.

The question is who is serious and who is just playing games. The answer is in every respect mid-ground. All three sides in this duel need to take matters seriously and a compromise should be sought from all. Pristina has to realise Serbia does have interests in Kosovo; Belgrade has to move away from the desire to keep Kosovo but without its majority population; while the international community has to decide if it wants a lasting settlement based on international law and order (which has not yet appeared) or just a short-term political fix which will cause problems in the mid to long term.

The sad reality is that there have been no negotiations so far, just an attempt at negotiating where two sides were brought together under false pretences. While Belgrade has been too conservative and naive in terms of *realpolitik*, it has offered more on the table at the strategic level. Pristina has played on the tactical card by offering small concession to the local Serbs, while remaining adamant about its strategic objective: independence and nothing short of independence. The international community has been the main bluffer in the whole process with declaratory statements indicating a facilitatory approach while not offering much of substance.

Addressing the future is most relevant in this context. Three questions are important in this respect: how will any decision affect the people on the ground, how will it affect Serbia as the most strategic actor and what will regional implications be?

At the local level, Kosovo has the potential to become at worst a failed state and at best a copy and paste of Bosnia & Herzegovina. Peace, the alleged primary objective, will have been achieved, probably temporarily, at the cost of other stated objectives,

the most important being a multi-ethnic Kosovo. If this happens, then NATO and the West did go to war for the wrong reasons and they will appear to have failed in their ultimate aim. The issue of precedent and international order are other debatable questions, whose only justification lies in the political domain. In other words, the likelihood of Serbs south of the Ibar river leaving Kosovo is real, while the fate of Mitrovica will hang in the balance and partition on the ground looms over UNMIK's head. Such developments will preclude any active participation of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo's new institutions in the short to medium term.

The question of **Serbs in Kosovo** is a difficult question to address. The final outcome will depend on the details of the status deal, on Belgrade's reaction, on the perceptions this will have in Kosovo itself and the actions of the Kosovo Albanian leadership, and lastly on other factors such as the media and the international presence in the area. Preliminary efforts to address this issue are underway on all fronts, but their success will only be determined if or when a crisis erupts.

Pristina for its part will be forced to be content with what the West has on offer. After all it is aware that this is the best deal it is likely to get, considering all the failures in implementing standards, not to mention the tragic events of March 2004. Yes, the delay might test local cohesion, but the fact that the local political leadership has promised something which it does not have within its power is not enough justification to push this issue beyond reason. Their request for an immediate status solution has no logic. After all, if a future Kosovo under any status wants to become part of the international community, political leadership at least should have an understanding of the way international diplomacy works.

The impact on **Serbia** is most worrisome as it is unlikely to be positive. Many in the West are relieved now that the status issue has been postponed and new elections can run with the dark clouds from the past pushed aside for the time being. The general assumption is that the 'democratic block' will form a new government some time February 2007 in one form or another - meaning that coalition issues will dominate the immediate Serbian political scene. No strategic shift on the domestic political scene should be expected, apart from the DS confirming its dominance of the 'democratic' block. The end result of this will again be a divergence between a *de jure* constitutional requirement not to deal with Kosovo if fully independent and a *de facto* EU requirement to have a constructive approach. The nature of this divergence, which is now codified within the constitution, will depend on the exact power-sharing agreements within the new coalition government.

As stated above a negative Kosovo status outcome is almost certain for Belgrade. However, the key will be how Belgrade perceives or defines the negative outcome. A mildly negative status solution will allow the 'democratic' block to claim some victory against all odds. However, a solution that does not allow any such interpretation will play into the hands of the opposing radical-nationalist elements, led by the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). This immediately calls into question the survivability of any newly elected 'democratic' government, which could be faced with either a vote of no confidence or mass demonstrations that could lead to new elections. Hence, for the West the immediate post-election problem is likely to be damage limitation in Belgrade, South Serbia and among Kosovo Serbs.

Discussions between Kostunica and SRS Deputy Head Nikolic have had some result and should not be considered a bad policy option in some limited respects. If the Kosovo outcome is negative, but with scope for *de facto* partition - which is likely, then a new deal with the radical-nationalist elements might postpone any

immediate crisis. This scenario might be good for Belgrade but it would only add uncertainty for the Kosovo Serbs and frustration in Pristina and the West – negatively impacting on overall development. There will be little scope for alternatives in the short to medium term, especially if the current elections bring little new on the political scene. The role of the West in preventing this polarisation could be limited. While a violent attempt at partition can not be excluded, especially if the SRS do well in the forthcoming elections, it is unlikely – as the end objective can be achieved in more subtle ways with little political confrontation with the West.

The region? Well, apart from the possibility of some incidents, overall it will remain stable for the short to medium term blessed by the international presence. However, stable does not mean prosperous in any sense of the word. Hopefully, what the OSCE likes to term the economic aspects of security will become the main priority and concern for both domestic and international actors – as this is the only way forward. In any case the short to medium term scenario will not be far from that of weak states characterised by low economic activity, low income families, corruption and personality driven politics – where organised crime is set to become a concern for all, including Western capitals.

Moving to the medium to long term, there is no saying that Pristina will not seek to materialise its long lasting dream of Greater Albania. After all, if two sovereign states decide on this move how can it be stopped? The borders of Macedonia and Montenegro then become questionable in their turn. This matter always rests in the eyes of the beholder, not Brussels or Washington. It rests on the often forgotten truism that the Kosovo Albanian battle was ignited long before Milosevic and his ‘bloody’ regime.

The international actors have to set their own agenda right and move from the page dominated by political and lobbies rhetoric to one characterised by logic and legality, with the preservation of international order as the key common denominator. Furthermore, they should not only demand *realpolitik* from Belgrade, but be realistic in their own expectations and commitments to the region – especially in terms of integration and economic ‘lifelines’ in the form of aid, subsidies and investments. While the UN should remain the final status and standards ‘auditing body’, the EU should become the primary actor and as such it should get engaged more in Serbia and Kosovo - including micro-management where necessary. So far this has not been the case, and that gap has significantly contributed to the current situation in this part of the region. After all, the interests of everyone are the same: long-term peace, stability and development for all. Only such concerted and well targeted efforts will carry the region as a whole forward.

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