

A short commentary on Kosovo's future status: No need to rush out independence

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After the UN special envoy, Mr. Ahtisaari, presented his plan in March 2007, the debate on Kosovo's future status reached a critical point. In fact, Mr. Ahtissari's plan envisages Kosovo's independence after a short –however not clearly indicated– period of EU supervision and NATO security guarantees. The US and major European countries expressed their vivid interest in that plan and advocated the adoption of a UNSC resolution based on the very same plan. In Russia, however, there was a widespread discontent about the plan. Mr. Ahtisaari's proposal did not consist in a voluntary compromise between the leadership of Serbia and the leadership of the UN-administrated province of Kosovo, but instead it was a product of arbitration. In fact, Russia raised three major concerns: (a) the plan was drafted in line with Western interests without taking into consideration other Security Council members' positions; (b) Kosovo's independence would constitute an unwelcome precedent for other aspirant secessionist movements across Europe and elsewhere; and (c) Mr. Ahtissari's plan was imbalanced, for it did not address some key Serbian concerns. Russia seems not to be willing to support a UNSC resolution without substantial modifications of the plan. The US, on the other hand, appears determined to recognize Kosovo as an independent state even without a resolution been adopted. Senior UN and US diplomats warned that further delays on the future status of Kosovo might ignite violence in the province and perplex things on the ground. In their view, the status of Kosovo could be held in limbo no more.

For a couple of months diplomats and analysts thought that the US would eventually take unilateral steps if there was no agreement. Unilateralism, however, would not work in the case of Kosovo. The overall assessment was that the US political determination would not

be enough to guarantee the peaceful transformation of the province into an independent state. Military might alone could not do the job and thus the EU's civilian contribution to such a mission was deemed indispensable. The Union pledged a Rule of Law mission under its European Security and Defense Policy and generous financial aid. Some EU member states, however, expressed their reservations about the EU's participation in a non-UN authorized mission in the Balkans. The idea of bypassing the Security Council appeared a daunting prospect, for it would have constituted an unprecedented shift from the underpinning principles of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. In my view, it is because of the EU's second thoughts that the US plan to unilaterally recognize Kosovo was postponed. If the EU was brought on board, the US would have found a way around the Russian veto.

A journalist, Nicolas Wood, cited a Western diplomat advising the EU to make 'the hard decision' on Kosovo soon, otherwise "the Europeans will have to ask themselves how much violence are prepared to take" (International Herald Tribune, July 8 2007). If taken for granted, that point of view would have engendered a false dilemma: 'Rush out independence or face up to the havoc of intercommunal violence'. This, however, is the wrong way of thinking about the future of Kosovo. Firstly, violence could be ignited at any time in Kosovo independently of the course of negotiations on the future status of the province. Kosovo Albanian leaders have every interest to refrain from dramatizing the situation and to endeavor to keep extremism at bay. A UN-backed and well prepared, as opposed to a US-forced, transformation is in the interest of Kosovo Albanians as well. Secondly, both the US and the EU maintain credible leverage on Kosovo Albanian leaders to urge them to refrain from making a unilateral declaration of independence and to advise them to be patient. Rushed independence will not ameliorate the situation. It will just make things worse.

Kosovo is a European problem. In any case, it is not in the best interest of the EU to clash with Russia over the future status of Kosovo when there is certain leeway to work out

some practicalities and to accommodate Russian concerns. The EU will need Russia as a partner in the post-settlement era and such a partnership could be developed only on the basis of mutual trust. Mutuality implies that, in its part, Russia should demonstrate leadership and signal its eagerness to work constructively with the EU and the US so that all grey areas would be clarified and all legitimate concerns would be addressed. The fact that the US seems to acknowledge both Russia's determination to veto the proposed resolution and the EU's concerns over the legitimacy of an unauthorized Kosovo mission is a positive sign for future negotiations. Dan Fried, a US senior diplomat, said that the plans that would enable Kosovo to claim independence might not be acted upon by Western governments and Russia until next year (International Herald Tribune, 8 July 2007).

The choice is not between an imposed solution and no solution, as several Western diplomats thought some months ago, but a better negotiated settlement that will readily address, first and foremost, Serbian and Kosovo Albanian concerns.