



Policy Recommendations

of the PFP-Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in South East Europe”:

“Cutting or Tightening the Gordian Knot? – The Future of Kosovo and the Peace Process in the Western Balkans after the Decision on Independence”¹

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General estimation of the post-status development

The post-February development has neither led to cutting nor to tightening of the Gordian knot around Kosovo. It was clear for anyone involved in the Balkan peace processes that Kosovo’s declaration of independence, its recognition by the US government, most of the EU countries and by other UN members will not resolve immediately all the problems in this part of the region.

However, pessimistic outlooks that the whole region might fall again into chaos have not proved to be true and there are no signs that this will happen. The clarification of the status of Kosovo allowed Serb-Albanian relations to enter a new phase of conflict transformation with the opportunity to improve but also to worsen these relations.

The four key issues to address for moving forward in a positive direction are:

a) finding a practicable arrangement for the international presence in the post-status period which will prevent “rivalry” between the UN and EU presence in Kosovo;

¹ This paper sums up the policy recommendations from the study group meeting on the latest development in Kosovo and its regional implications, held in Reichenau/Lower Austria, 23-26 May 2008. A comprehensive publication is in preparation, which will appear in the study group information series of the Austrian National Defence Academy.

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- b) finding ways to build confidence between Belgrade and Prishtina despite the political and “emotional” gaps in the Serb-Albanian relations as well as between the Kosovo institutions and the Kosovo Serbs;
- c) preventing negative effects of the Kosovo status issue for regional stability, especially in regard to the sensitive interethnic relations in southern Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Bosnia-Herzegovina; and
- d) optimizing the influence of the Euro-Atlantic institutions for supporting proactive policies in regard to peace-building.

Concerning the international presence in Kosovo

As it was expected, mid June brought no clear cut and official handover from UNMIK to EULEX and to the International Civilian Office (ICO). Most probably some elements of UNMIK will continue to exist alongside the new EU presence for a while. A negative consequence of that could be that frustration on the Kosovo Albanian side will increase with possible negative repercussions on the security situation.

In order to avoid a radicalization on the Kosovo-Albanian side on the issue of international presence new attempts to achieve Russia’s and China’s consent for EULEX in the Security Council should be made.

Russia seems to be in favour of Serbia’s membership in the EU and would not advocate Serbian self-isolation. This circumstance could perhaps open a window of opportunity to reconcile the western and the Russian policies towards Kosovo – at least as far as the international presence there is concerned.

Confidence building measures between Serbs and Albanians

The appointment of a mainly pro-European government in Belgrade in July was generally regarded as a precondition for achieving some progress in the Serb-Albanian relations and to open communication channels. Despite the better political circumstances in Serbia, building confidence between the two sides will be a laborious and long-lasting process.

The Serb government will not recognize Kosovo’s independence. Direct contacts of Serb officials with representatives of the Kosovo institutions – even in a multilateral forum – are not very probable in the foreseeable future. As a consequence of that the Serb population

in Kosovo will continue to avoid contacts with the Albanian majority and especially with the Kosovo institutions. In the short term there are only limited possibilities to reduce the strong ethnic divisions in the Mitrovica area.

Nevertheless there is a chance that Belgrade could “soften” its rhetoric on Kosovo and establish contacts with the reconfigured international civilian presence there (including EULEX), due to the Serb government’s priority goal to move forward in the process of European integration and its more proactive policy regarding the improvement of living conditions for their co-nationals in Kosovo. Evidence of this pragmatism can be seen in the apprehension of long-time war crimes suspect Radovan Karadžić, and his extradition to The Hague in late July 2008.

A Serbian move towards a more “pragmatic” policy on Kosovo could create space for using informal ways to increase confidence between Belgrade and Prishtina as well as between the Kosovo authorities and those Kosovo Serbs who live south of the river Ibar. A precondition for such a positive development is to find areas of common interest, which are not directly linked to the status issue.

A first important step to start with confidence-building in the Belgrade-Prishtina relations would be to exchange information – via channels of international mediators and NGOs – on missing persons and to support the other side in investigating these cases. Both sides have hundreds of such cases, which prevent the final closing of the war period.

With regard to Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo itself the initiative for building confidence must be taken by the Albanian majority. In order to address the Kosovo Serb tendency toward self-isolation, the predominantly ethnic-Albanian government of Kosovo should develop a proactive policy, which should follow the guideline of “positive discrimination.” Such a policy should include raising awareness for the human security needs of the Kosovo Serbs on the side of Kosovo authorities, above all in the police sector. Another measure that could contribute to a change of perception of the Albanian majority would be the Kosovo government’s support for the return of Serbs as employees and workers in the public firms.

A possibly less complicated way to achieve improvements in interethnic relations – especially as far as young people are concerned – is to initiate joint educational programmes with international support and supervision. The Macedonian experience has

shown that such educational programmes are highly accepted by the youngsters of the different ethnic groups, if the courses are held in a politically and ethnically “neutral” tongue, such as English. Such initiatives would be very welcome to the EU Commission that has received credit in South East Europe for having strengthened local capacity in the field of education and having successfully supported intercultural projects.

In Kosovo, the international actors, compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, have been less engaged in identifying and supporting moderate individuals and groups from civil society initiatives, NGOs or political platforms that could be driving forces for enhancing inter-ethnic confidence. Without fulfilling this precondition, “confidence-building” remains an empty shell.

Concerning the regional implications

The Kosovo situation influences the stability in the neighbourhood, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM and southern Serbia, but so far these implications are not so dramatic regarding their extent as some pessimists forecast.

In the Serb-dominated entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska, politicians who are involved in massive corruption use the fear that the Kosovo situation could destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina as a kind of shield. The international support for establishing functioning state structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina therefore should concentrate on building transparent economic structures. This would embarrass corrupt politicians in their society and would diminish their opportunities to manipulate political issues that are of importance for regional stability.

So far the status or post-status process in Kosovo has not negatively influenced the security situation in FYROM. Macedonian and ethnic-Albanian politicians reached a consensus that they will recognize Kosovo when the border issues have been resolved. In order to secure a common policy of Macedonian and ethnic-Albanian politicians in FYROM regarding relevant foreign issues, a faster integration of FYROM into the Euro-Atlantic institutions would be helpful. With regard to the problems connected with the integration of FYROM into NATO this would also demand a more active role of the NATO partners to persuade the Greek side to be more flexible in achieving a compromise with the Macedonian government in the name dispute.

A spillover from Kosovo could more seriously affect southern Serbia, although the present security situation can be described as relatively calm. Some of the leading local Albanian politicians openly show their mistrust in the central government in Belgrade and draw a parallel between their political demands and the political situation in the Serb-dominated northern part of Kosovo.

The international actors that are involved in the processes of peace building in the region should influence the new government in Belgrade to correct the mistakes made by Koštunica's government towards the Albanians in southern Serbia. This means that Belgrade should dissociate itself from plans to (re-)militarize southern Serbia and instead take much more care of programmes stemming from the Djindjić period (2000-2003), which aimed at improving the economic situation in this underdeveloped area. In southern Serbia like in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the other multiethnic areas of the Western Balkans, reconciliation is very much linked to economic development. More donor engagement from the international side would be necessary in this field.

Concerning the role of the Euro-Atlantic institutions

Despite Serbia's position on Kosovo, which contradicts that of the majority of EU and NATO member states that recognized Kosovo's independence, the EU is rightly following the course to continue with the association process. On the other hand, the EU's flexible and open minded policy towards Serbia – as far as Serbia's efforts to integrate into the EU are concerned – must not lead to watering down the principle of regional co-operation.

So far this has been an important condition that all the Western Balkan candidate countries have to meet in order to approach EU membership. The EU should stick to this important principle. This means for the Serbian government that it has to find ways to communicate with the Kosovo representatives in regional forums while retaining its right to have a negative position on Kosovo's independence.

Regarding the goal to improve Serb-Albanian relations, NATO's influence on the Albanian side is certainly much bigger than on Serbs. This is valid in particular for Kosovo's security sector. The NATO-guided creation of the Kosovo Security Forces should have as a priority their ability to cooperate in a regional and international framework. Symbols and traditions which could provoke fear on the side of Kosovo-Serbs should be avoided.