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Kosovo on the Eve of the Parliamentary Elections in Serbia 21 January 2007

A Situation Report

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Tensions in Kosovo are mounting ahead of the forthcoming announcement of the UN plan for the future status of the province. UN envoy, the former Finnish president, Martti Ahtisaari, will come to Priština and Belgrade on the same day early in February to present his plan for the future status of Kosovo. Ahtisaari has established an understanding with the members of the so-called Contact group for Kosovo to present his plan soon after the parliamentary elections in Serbia on 21 January 2007. The Group includes the US, Russia, Germany, France, the UK and Italy. There have been signals from Ahtisaari's team that his plan would provide for a factual independence of the province although the document allegedly avoids to call it by that name. The new statute should be reached after a protracted period of time under which Kosovo would remain under international control to ensure the rule of law and especially the safety of the Serb and other minorities.

The international peacekeeping forces in Kosovo, KFOR, have been preparing since months for the eventuality that the culmination of the status negotiations that started in the summer of 2006 could be accompanied by increasing conflicts in the region, including unrest and outbreaks of violence.

In December 2006, groups of masked people dressed in black uniforms, similar to those worn by the Kosovo Liberation Army during the war in the province 1998/1999, appeared in the Djakovica and Dečane regions. They were stopping and searching vehicles and people. It is believed in Priština that Alliance for the Future of Kosovo leader and former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj and his brother, Daut, might be the organizers of these groups.

Kosovo police in cooperation with KFOR discovered on 20 December in the municipality of Glogovac, Drenica region, a veritable arsenal of weapons – 116 75mm artillery and anti-tank grenades, two machineguns, one 75mm recoilless cannon, two hand grenades, some military uniforms and masks as well as 2,500 rounds of various calibre ammunition. The weapons and uniforms were discovered late in the night in a van in which three senior officials of Haradinaj's party were riding. The officials are also advisers to the Kosovo minister of labour and social welfare, himself a senior party official.

There were speculations in Priština that the weapons were intended for Haradinaj's private unit located in the mountains around Junik, near Dečane, in the border region toward Albania. Haradinaj has decided to turn his brother Daut, a Kosovo Protection Corps general, into a politician. Daut was sentenced to seven years in prison for war crimes. He was released last spring after serving four years. He will

probably take over the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo once Ramush Haradinaj leaves for The Hague.

On 3 January, one Kosovo police officer, an ethnic Albanian, was killed from a passing car in the vicinity of a Serbian village close to Priština. The Kosovo police suspect a local Serb, who is believed in the meanwhile to be in Belgrade, to be the perpetrator. The search of several Serbian houses by the police fuelled new ethnic tensions. The Belgrade government made ample use of this incident in the on-going pre-election campaign saying that the Kosovo police search actions in Serbian villages revealed again that Kosovo Albanians are exerting pressure on the Serbian minority.

The Serb and Albanian agenda

In Serbia, Kosovo is an important, but not dominant issue in the pre-election campaign for the new parliament on 21 January. Yet, the differences between the opinions of the political parties regarding Kosovo are not that big. Whereas Serbian President Boris Tadić is preparing the population for an „unfavourable outcome” of the status process, Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica has reiterated that he will not acquiesce to any form of international pressure to abandon Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo. Yet, in essence, the political class in Serbia would like to see a face-saving outcome, nothing more. As Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković repeatedly said, in future Kosovo should be to Serbia what Taiwan now to China is.

Drašković is expected to be among the big losers of the forthcoming elections, as his party, the Serbian Renewal Movement, will most probably not make it over the five percent threshold. Tadić's thinly veiled distancing from the Kosovo issue as the most important political question in Serbia is useful for his Democratic Party to attract voters left of the middle. For them Kosovo is only a nuisance and a hindrance on Serbia's faster way to the EU. Koštunica is using the Kosovo issue to lure voters from the extreme nationalist Serbian Radical Party, who are scared by this party's threats to wage a new war over Kosovo and even to fight again for Greater Serbia with parts of Bosnia and Croatia.

The outcome of the Serbian election is not clear, but most opinion polls suggest that the so-called Democratic group of parties will have a comfortable majority over the Serbian Radical Party which might turn out to be the single most powerful force in the parliament. Yet, how and when Tadić's Democratic Party and Koštunica's Democratic Party of Serbia will find common ground to form a government is also unclear at the moment. An important role will be played by the small ethnic parties (Hungarians, Moslems from the Sandžak region, Roma, Albanians from South Serbia) that are exempted from the 5 percent rule. For them, it is enough to win a certain number of votes cast in their region to gain parliamentary seats. Depending on the turnout of the voters, there are various scenarios for a future government. If several smaller non-ethnic parties, such as the liberal G17plus or Socialists (Milošević's former party) manage to pass the threshold, the formation of the government will become even more complicated, if not impossible. However, whatever government eventually comes to reign Serbia, it will still be confronted with the issue of the future status of Kosovo.

Kosovo's on-going demographic explosion is the strongest reason why Serbia is essentially not interested in reclaiming political and, more important, economic responsibility over the province. Also, no one in Belgrade would like to share political power with Albanian politicians should Kosovo ever be re-integrated into Serbia's political system. In the unlikely case that Kosovo becomes again an integrated part of Serbia, in future every third conscript would be Albanian. Moreover, every year in this province about 35.000 young people enter the labour market. No amount of external financial aid or even a domestic economic miracle can produce an adequate number of working places for a huge number of mostly uneducated youths.

As migration to the rest of former Yugoslavia and to Western Europe has stopped since 1999, the inner social and economic tensions in Kosovo are constantly rising. Therefore, the status issue is also an effective tool for the local Albanian leaders to divert attention from their failure to push back corruption and organised crime in Kosovo, foster the rule of law and create conditions for economic growth. At the same time, there is a spreading discussion about the future relation between the Albanian dominated territories in the region with some voices advocating now openly the creation of a greater Albanian state as the long-term goal of the nation. Albanians form the majority in Kosovo, Northwest Macedonia, Eastern Montenegro and a strategically important valley in South Serbia.

External players

The positions of the Albanian and Serbian sides regarding the future status of Kosovo are irreconcilable. At the same time, Washington and Moscow are miles apart on this question.

Nonetheless, the European Union has agreed to act as the "driving force" of a future international presence, after a settlement on a new status for Kosovo and the withdrawal of the UN. The EU's self-imposed responsibilities were expounded in a joint report by the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana, and Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn at the meeting of the EU foreign ministers on June 17, 2006. As well as economic and fiscal questions, central issues will include implementation of the status solution and "an important role in the rule of law area". Additionally, the "international presence" will also "need to have some limited intervention powers to ensure that the status settlement is implemented". The EU has already started intensive preparations for this new mission although it can be launched only on the basis of a new UN Security Council resolution.

The United States wants a solution for Kosovo on the basis of independence supervised first by the EU. Moscow, on the other hand, rejects Washington's position and demands that "universal" rules be applied: If Kosovo is to become independent then the same option should remain open to the Russian-influenced breakaway regions of former Soviet republics (South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and the Trans-Dniester Republic in Moldova).

Russia's President Vladimir Putin seems to have promised Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica at a meeting in June 2006 that Moscow would not permit in the UN Security Council any solution for Kosovo that would be imposed on Belgrade. Serbia's stance has hardened noticeably since this meeting. In the meanwhile, Moscow has gone on record with the threat to veto any UN Security Council resolution on the future status of Kosovo that is not accepted by both sides. On 15 January, in an unusual move, Putin accepted Koštunica's request to have a telephone conversation with the Serbian prime minister and, according to Belgrade, reiterated Russia's support for a negotiated solution for the future status for Kosovo.

At the end of the G8 summit in St Petersburg in mid-July 2006, President Putin, speaking in the name of all the G8 leaders, called on the Albanian and Serbian sides to show willingness to compromise. At the same time, Putin insisted on "full control" for the UN Security Council over the further course of the Kosovo negotiations. This means that a binding decision on a status solution can only be made by way of a new resolution, and such a resolution requires the agreement or at least the abstention of Russia and China. UN resolution 1244, passed in 1999 and still valid, confirms that the province belongs to Belgrade under international law.

There is certainly a danger that the UN mediators will not find a way to steer the Kosovo negotiations to a mutually acceptable conclusion. If the talks fail, there is a threat of serious clashes and ensuing chaos returning to the Western Balkans in early 2007. In that case the United States, in particular, could be inclined to enforce a quick solution without regard to the political costs in Europe. Joseph Biden, the incoming Democratic chairman of the US Senate foreign relations committee, and one of the most influential foreign policy actors in Washington, has repeatedly said that the US should secure Kosovo's independence to yield a victory for a "Muslim democracy". The "people of Kosovo – already the most pro-American in the Islamic world – will provide a much-needed example of a successful US-Muslim partnership", Biden wrote recently in the Financial Times. One of the scenarios that has been discussed in US and EU diplomatic circles in the recent past for the case that there is no agreement with Russia concerning Kosovo envisages that individual states could recognize the independence of the province without explicit UN approval.