

## **THE KOSOVO KNOT: IS A FAIR SOLUTION POSSIBLE?<sup>1</sup>**

Public discussions about possible outcomes of the Kosovo knot have become noticeably livelier recently. The United States and the EU are striving to make themselves an indispensable part of the settlement and are competing for the leading role in this process. In addition, as it happened before, they often disregard the opinions of other stakeholders, which fact calls into question the very possibility of finding a fair solution. Looking back into the recent past and analysing the regrettable consequences of external interference in the region's affairs is something that must be done if we want to avoid making more mistakes. We also believe it is important to provide a general assessment of the current state of affairs and to outline our fundamental approaches to the Kosovo settlement.

The unresolved Kosovo problem has for over 20 years been an obstacle to a full-fledged stabilisation in the Western Balkan region and given rise to more outbursts of tension. The time bomb was laid at a time when the Western allies that bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 set the goal of ensuring the region's independence in circumvention of international law. It was done under a cynical front of "multivariance," meaning it would be done either

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<sup>1</sup> Article co-authored by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic published in Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Serbian Kurir on June 18, 2020/

[https://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset\\_publisher/zwI2FuDbhJx9/content/sov\\_mestnaa-stat-a-ministra-inostrannyh-del-rossijskoj-federacii-s-v-lavrova-i-pervogo-zamestitela-predsdatela-pravitel-stva-ministra-inostrannyh-del-?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_zwI2FuDbhJx9\\_redirect=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.mid.ru%252Fen%252Fdiverse%253Fp\\_p\\_id%253D101\\_INSTANCE\\_zwI2FuDbhJx9%2526p\\_p\\_lifecycle%253D0%2526p\\_p\\_state%253Dnormal%2526p\\_p\\_mode%253Dview%2526p\\_p\\_col\\_id%253Dcolumn-1%2526p\\_p\\_col\\_pos%253D2%2526p\\_p\\_col\\_count%253D6](https://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwI2FuDbhJx9/content/sov_mestnaa-stat-a-ministra-inostrannyh-del-rossijskoj-federacii-s-v-lavrova-i-pervogo-zamestitela-predsdatela-pravitel-stva-ministra-inostrannyh-del-?_101_INSTANCE_zwI2FuDbhJx9_redirect=https%253A%252F%252Fwww.mid.ru%252Fen%252Fdiverse%253Fp_p_id%253D101_INSTANCE_zwI2FuDbhJx9%2526p_p_lifecycle%253D0%2526p_p_state%253Dnormal%2526p_p_mode%253Dview%2526p_p_col_id%253Dcolumn-1%2526p_p_col_pos%253D2%2526p_p_col_count%253D6)

with or without Belgrade's consent. In other words, Serbia's opinion was ignored from day one. Such a flawed approach in flagrant violation of UNSCR 1244 is aimed solely at satisfying the Kosovars' separatist aspirations.

In 2008, when "independence" was announced in Pristina by way of accomplished fact, persistent attempts were made to talk Moscow and Belgrade into believing that the negotiating potential had been exhausted. Russia's and Serbia's calls, including at the highest level, to continue the talks and stick to the international law and UNSCR 1244 were ignored. A couple of years later, the developments had the parties resume the dialogue. Brussels acted as a mediator, and the UN General Assembly approved it by Resolution 64/298 in 2010.

Since then, the international community could see on many occasions that the only way to find a viable settlement was to do so while observing UNSCR 1244 with a balanced and genuine consideration of the stakeholders' interests.

The concept of Kosovo's self-proclaimed "sovereignty" fell through. It is not supported either in the Balkans, or in Europe, or other parts of the world for that matter. About half of the UN member states do not recognise Kosovo's "statehood" and the number of such countries is growing. More and more capitals are realising the danger (including for themselves) of the precedent created by Kosovo involving external military interference in the affairs of an independent state under far-fetched pretexts.

The failure of Kosovo's independence can be clearly seen from the situation in that region.

Kosovo is in the grips of political chaos. Local parties are mired in a bitter fight for power, scheming, mutual accusations and clan feuds amid economic downfall and rampant crime. Under these circumstances, the "state building" which the local leaders and their external sponsors love to talk about turned into a sham.

The wide presence in Kosovo of criminal elements associated with terrorist groups in the Middle East, primarily Syria, as well as with criminal gangs in the Balkans and other parts of Europe, means that the region with its rich historical and cultural heritage is becoming a den of thieves and criminals of all stripes.

Should this be any surprise with former Kosovo Liberation Army ringleaders holed up as Pristina's ruling elite? To investigate the atrocities, including murders and abductions for the purpose of illicit trafficking of human organs committed by some of them, a special court was created at the

EU initiative following a report by PACE member Dick Marty. We are still waiting for this judicial body to go live and bring charges against the criminals.

International presence should be beneficial for normalising the situation. Unfortunately, this is not happening. For years, the Kosovo Force has been passive in ensuring Serbs' security, which is their main mission. One of the consequences of this inactivity is the aggravation of the situation with preserving the relics of the Serbian Orthodox Church located in this region. Energetic and targeted efforts of UNESCO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe are needed to guarantee their safety.

The effectiveness of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), whose mandate is defined by UNSCR 1244, also leaves much to be desired. It is difficult to expect anything different when Pristina shamelessly disregards this Security Council resolution. The West, however, has turned a blind eye to the Kosovars' brazen behaviour and downplays the incidents of intimidation of UN personnel.

The fact that Camp Bondsteel was usurped is causing our concern. It was created as a peacekeeping base but turned into an off-limits training site for the Kosovo "armed forces", which causes our deep concern. In fact, it's an attempt to whitewash the Kosovo Liberation Army, which started the war in the late 1990s that led to the region breaking away from Serbia.

The question about the NATO countries' liability for using munitions with depleted uranium during the 1999 bombing in Serbia, especially Kosovo, remains open. The local population continues to suffer en masse from the radioactive contamination, and international peacekeepers have also felt its debilitating effect. A recent court ruling in France has confirmed that the NATO aggression left a deadly and lasting mark on Serbia.

Irresponsible politicians with their Great Albania rhetoric regularly add fuel to the flames of this smoldering conflict. Their Western colleagues are in no hurry to censure the activists who are broadcasting the ideas of Great Albania from Pristina and Tirana. Meanwhile, the destructive potential of this ideology is capable of burying the system of regional stability that took decades to build.

Over the past few months, the EU and the United States have been vigorously campaigning for resuming a dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Of course, we are supportive of the political methods of settlement, but we believe that the talks should be based on the principle of bona fide implementation of previous agreements. The key principle is creating a full-fledged Community of Kosovo Serbian Municipalities (CKSM) endowed with

the appropriate authority. The EU's direct responsibility as an intermediary in the negotiating process is to have the Kosovo authorities fulfill their obligations. So far, no progress has been made in creating the CKSM.

Prior to the new phase in the dialogue, it was necessary to revoke the anti-Serb discriminatory measures introduced by the Pristina authorities in recent years. As a mediator, the EU must ensure that the Kosovars will not resume this vicious practice.

Let's hope that the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Miroslav Lajcak will act as honest brokers.

At the same time, we note that Serbia's admission to the EU is still used by some as a lever to exert pressure on Belgrade in matters of recognising Kosovo's "independence." It turns out that to become an EU member, the applicant state must give away a chunk of its territory. Those behind this absurd demand see a certain threat in the possible adjustment of the Kosovo administrative line. Such a concern seems all the more hypocritical if you think about who and how dismembered Yugoslavia.

Regardless, Russia and Serbia continue to believe that it is necessary to comply with UNSCR 1244. The search for a compromise during the negotiating process is the exclusive prerogative of Belgrade and Pristina. They must articulate and adopt the final decision to be approved by the UN Security Council. Moscow will agree only with a settlement that Belgrade will accept.

With regard to external assistance to the talks, it should be impartial in monitoring compliance with the international legal framework for dialogue without imposing ready-made solutions.

Moscow and Belgrade are strategic partners. Our aim is to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation in a wide range of areas. This approach will not be affected by Serbia's plan to negotiate accession to the EU. Serbia will continue to promote its ties with Russia and the EAEU.

We will continue to work closely to achieve settlement in Kosovo based on respect for UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

*Sergej Lavrov and Ivica Dačić*