

Comment: Getting Real on Kosovo

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It's time for the international community to get off the fence on Kosovo. Over the past five years, the final status issue has been delayed and ignored while Kosovo's two million inhabitants continue to exist in an international limbo.

The population will never accept a return to Belgrade rule, and Serbia does not really want it anyway. The idea of union with other Albanian territories does not interest anyone except a handful of fanatics, and partition would set a dangerous precedent for other potential conflict zones.

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The deadly violence of March 2004 showed that the international community cannot rely on local goodwill forever. Either 2005 will see the start of a final status solution that consolidates peace and development, or Kosovo may return to conflict and generate regional instability.

As a first step, the six-nation Contact Group (the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia) should issue as soon as possible a statement spelling out a schedule for the resolution of the status issue, with independence as the goal.

This must contain some crucial ground-rules: that the protection of minority rights is the issue on which progress will most depend, and that neither Kosovo's return to Belgrade's rule, nor its partition, nor any possible unification of Kosovo with Albania or any neighbouring state or territory will be supported.

A Special Envoy should manage the process, working closely with the UN Special Representative in charge of Kosovo, Søren Jessen-Petersen. In mid-2005, the UN is due to assess the Kosovo government's commitment to democracy, good governance and human rights standards.

If the assessment is positive, the Special Envoy should prepare a draft settlement text - the "Kosovo Accord" - and the details of an international conference to endorse it.

Kosovo's Albanians should not wait until then, however, to start repairing their relations with their own Serb minority. They should immediately start working on a "Pristina - Open City" campaign to attract residents of nearby Serb enclaves back into the capital, and to the nearby urban centres they were burned out of in the March 2004 riots. But they should also begin to prepare a constitution for an independent Kosovo, with more than adequate rights guaranteed for all minorities and with provision for internationally-appointed judges on Kosovo's superior courts. They should also prepare for an international monitoring presence, a "Kosovo Monitoring Mission", to report to the wider international community and recommend appropriate measures if Kosovo backslides on its obligations.

Serbia needs to accept that Kosovo is lost, and that the role of Belgrade is to make the best case they can for the Serbs of Kosovo, rather than fantasise that they will get all, or part, of the province back.

Serbia has legitimate interests in resolving public and private property disputes, guaranteeing the situation of the Patriarchate of Pec and other important religious buildings, and settling the question of Kosovo's share of Serbia's international debt - where the international community should be prepared to find a generous solution. This can all be achieved if Belgrade acquires a sense of reality.

Recent noises from Belgrade are not encouraging in this regard. Media reports about the plight of Serb villagers in Kosovo who have no electricity supplies have somehow failed to mention that many Albanian villagers are in just as bad a position, and their electricity has been cut off because they have not paid their bills.

Justice Minister Zoran Stojkovic appears to believe that resolving the legacy of past conflicts through compliance with the Hague war crimes tribunal is not in fact essential for Serbia's future relations with the outside world, despite the withdrawal last week of US aid to Serbia precisely on the basis of Belgrade's failure to meet the tribunal's demands.

It is not surprising that the EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, called off a planned visit to Belgrade this week because there had been insufficient progress on any of the issues he is interested in. The international community must not reward Belgrade's fantasies. Instead, it needs to reinforce the message that Belgrade has no veto on the resolution of Kosovo's final status, and that if it is necessary to find a solution that can be made to work without Belgrade's consent, that solution will be found.

Complacency has guided policy on Kosovo for too long. The potential for renewed violence is very real. The international community, in particular the member states of the Contact Group, must decide whether to regain control of the agenda or allow matters to slip until unpleasant new facts are created on the ground that they will have to deal with.

To tackle this agenda requires political courage as well as energy. But the alternative is worse.

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