

## **Fury at UN Final Status Conditions**

**Author:** [Artan Mustafa](#)

Tough pre-conditions dash Kosovo's hopes of early discussion on independence.

Kosovar Albanians, yearning for independence, have been enraged by a raft of UN conditions which must be met before they can even talk about sovereignty.

It follows three years of the UN Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, persistently sidestepping the subject of Kosovo's future.

The eight standards were introduced by the UNMIK a year ago to set a course for the region's development. But in the second week of January, the international authority insisted that they had to be met in advance of final status talks.

Kosovans angrily accused the UN of approaching matters the wrong way round - they want status discussed before standards are set.

Tensions over the issue escalated last week following the creation of new EU-backed union between Montenegro and Serbia, under which Kosovo unequivocally remains in the latter.

Forty-two deputies in the Kosovo parliament threatened to declare independence. Some newspaper columnists said while they had a right to be angry, such unilateral action would be ill-advised as it got the region's nowhere in the past.

The territory's Albanian majority has been campaigning for independence ever since 1989 when they were ruled from Belgrade. After NATO forces prised loose Serbia's grip in 1999, Kosovo became a UN protectorate governed under Security Council resolution 1244.

The resolution obliged UNMIK to "facilitate a political process designed to determine Kosovo's future".

But the authority's head Michael Steiner has lately been playing down this aspect of his mission. In messages to the public in Pristina, Belgrade and on February 6 before the Security Council, he stressed that 2003 was still too early to talk about Kosovo's final status.

The checklist of challenging standards that must be fulfilled before final status can be discussed include the return of Serb refugees, freedom of movement for the minority, dialogue with Belgrade, the formation of democratic institutions and the establishment of the rule of law.

Ethnic Albanians, who make up 95 per cent of the Kosovo population, reject the UNMIK principle of "standards before status". Their leaders also worry about the lack of any time frame for these conditions to be reached.

Bajram Rexhepi, the prime minister of Kosovo, told IWPR that making the question of status a hostage to standards was unacceptable. "There must be, at least, a set deadline for these standards to be achieved',"

he said.

But Oliver Ivanovic, the Serbian member of the presidency of the Kosovo parliament, told IWPR that Serbs fully agree the "standards should be met before (final) status (talks)".

This reflected the view of minority Serbs that Kosovo is still part of Yugoslavia. They are in no hurry to see an Albanian-dominated Kosovo state.

For the Albanians, the return of Serbian refugees is probably one of the most difficult and painful issues on UNMIK's checklist. According to UNMIK sources, only 6,000 out of about 200,000 refugees, mainly Serbs, who left their houses after the NATO bombing, have returned to Kosovo.

The International Crisis Group, ICG, in Pristina argues that the lack of a defined final status for Kosovo discourages refugees from returning home. Serbs do not know whether they will be coming back to an independent Kosovo or a territory that still has links with Serbia.

UNMIK says it can assist in the return process but it could not provide indefinite security for those who do come back.

The second painful issue on the list is the suggestion that dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade must be established

Most Kosovo Albanians do not support such talks and consider that ties with Belgrade ended with the ethnic cleansing campaign during which more than half a million Albanians were driven out of their homes and thousands left dead or missing.

Enver Hasani, an international law professor at the University of Pristina, said this dialogue would have to start sooner or later. But he thought it should not begin now, at a time when the Greeks are heading the EU presidency for the next six months to be followed by the Italians. "Both (these countries) are known for their sympathy towards Serbia, and I think we would suffer from this," Hasani said.

The most recent blow to Albanian politicians in Pristina was the new union between Serbia and Montenegro, as they have been trying to convince themselves and the public that as each day goes by Kosovo has less and less to do with Belgrade.

There is a sense that the debate on independence is moving backwards to the underground age of 1990s Kosovan politics when Ibrahim Rugova unsuccessfully tried to persuade western governments to recognise the virtually self-declared Republic of Kosovo.

But then as now, Rugova and his allies are unlikely to meet with any success. Steiner has already insisted the UN will not allow unilateral decisions by Belgrade and Pristina to prejudice the independence issue - which would be for the Security Council alone to decide.

Meanwhile, the UN is emphasising the importance of its preconditions for final status talks. Whit Mason, a UNMIK official, said, "Kosovo is not expected to fulfill the standards perfectly. What the world is looking for is not perfection but substantial progress towards achieving standards.."

UNMIK is trying to promote the standards through short video clips shown by local TV stations. The videos produced some sardonic responses. One journalist wrote to Steiner on December 31 asking him whether Kosovars "meet the standards for celebrating New Year".

Artan Mustafa is a journalist of the daily Epoka e re in Kosovo.

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