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THE REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE KOSOVO CRISIS

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In order to identify the main political factors that contributed to unleash the recent crisis in Kosovo, one has to look at the wider regional context.

No doubt, a crucial event was the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the signing of the Dayton agreement. In general, it seems that the Western countries underestimated the far-reaching implications that this event would have for the balance of power in the Balkans as well as for the internal equilibrium of individual states. The crisis in Albania itself was, at least in part, caused by the cessation of some sources of black and illegal economy brought about by the end of hostilities in Bosnia. In retrospect, it appears evident that, far from being limited to the regions directly concerned, the implementation of the Dayton agreement is affecting massively the Southern Balkans, particularly the areas inhabited by ethnic Albanians.

In Kosovo the international agreements that put to an end the war in Bosnia were badly received by the Albanian population and eventually contributed to alineate a growing part of it from the peaceful strategy carried out by the leadership led by Ibrahim Rugova. A source of frustration was certainly the choice to exclude the Kosovo question from the agreement. This choice had two main motivations. On the one hand the willingness not to create additional obstacles to the signature of the agreement by Milosevic. On the other, there was a general feeling that the Kosovo question, in the absence of a credible and commonly shared strategy to deal with it, should be kept silent as much as possible, taking into account also its possible gloomy impact on the regional balance. The result of this decision was however a growing skepticism on the part of the Albanian population about the actual capacity and willingness of the international community to get involved in the Kosovo question, investing substantial diplomatic resources. In this sense, the neglect of the Albanian question in the Dayton agreement was a blow to the credibility of Rugova's strategy. Indeed, one of its pillars is in fact the internationalization of the Kosovo question, i.e. the constant search for a substantial involvement of the main international institutions and the most powerful and influential Western countries. The search for this international involvement has always been presented by Rugova as necessarily linked with the consistent exclusion of violent action.

This resentment for being ignored by the Dayton agreement was apparently coupled by a growing feeling that those ethnic groups or states that had engaged in military campaigns against the Serbs had been rewarded by the international community. This has convinced a growing number of Kosovar Albanians that at least some violence is a necessary pre-requisite to attract international attention and eventually win the support of the Western countries. The idea has gained currency among the opponents of the passive resistance advocated by Rugova that a wave of violent acts or even an insurrection is a key condition to promote the formation of an anti-Serb coalition with regard to the Albanian question in Kosovo. In other words, after the Dayton agreement the failure of Rugova's strategy both to advance the Albanian cause and to raise international support for it became even more evident and embarrassing for the current Albanian leadership in Kosovo.

There are however other regional factors that have contributed to make the Albanians in Kosovo more militant and increase the attractiveness of strategies other than the one followed by Rugova. The crisis that erupted in Albania proper in winter 1996-1997 and that has left the country much weaker and divided than before was also an important factor. Most of the hundred of thousands of weapons that were looted during the crisis from the police and army barracks have not yet been restituted to or recaptured by the authorities. Considerable quantities of those weapons fell in the hands of the most radical Albanian groups acting outside Albania. This is the case, in particular, of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK), whose increasing violent activism was the pretext of the Serbian military intervention and repressive action in the Drenica region. Transfers of arms between the various Albanian communities intensified following the crisis in Albania, making it easier for the paramilitary organisations in both Kosovo and the Former Republic of Macedonia to implement their rearmament strategies. Furthermore, the Socialist government in Albania is still finding it hard to keep under control the north of the country from which it is plausible that the radical Albanian groups receive substantial support in terms of logistics and equipment. It must be added that the continuing political struggle in Albania has made increasingly attractive for the opposition led by former President Berisha the exploitation of the nationalist card.

A third major factor was undoubtedly the weakening of Slobodan Milosevic's leadership and popularity in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including Serbia itself. In the last few months three main events contributed to convey the impression that the Serbian leadership in Yugoslavia can be effectively challenged even over highly sensitive policy issues. First, Milosevic was forced to accept a Western-led change in the leadership of the Bosnian Serbs, which represented a further major blow for Milosevic's prestige and power on both internal and international scene. Second Milosevic's candidate for the Presidency of Montenegro was defeated and the new President Djukanovic embarked on an autonomist course challenging the Serbian predominance in the Yugoslav Federation as well as Milosevic's policy towards Western countries. Third, the elections of September-November of last year in Serbia confirmed the erosion of Milosevic's popularity in favour of ultra-nationalists. These evident signs of an increasing weakness of the Serbian leadership have encouraged the Albanians in Kosovo to engage in a more confrontational course. Following especially the defeat of Milosevic's allies in Montenegro and Republika Srpska, a window of opportunity seems to have opened for non-Serbian ethnic groups in the Yugoslav Federation to pursue their political objectives with greater prospects of success. More generally, it is evident that the still ongoing internal struggle to consolidate power in the Yugoslav Federation will continue to have a major impact on the situation in Kosovo. While it seems that Milosevic is not currently interested in instigating or promoting a new Serbian nationalist campaign in Kosovo, since he wants to avoid to antagonize further the international community, his attitude can change in the future under the pressure of the new ultranationalist allies led by Seselj or should he see the nationalist card as the last one at his disposal to remain in power.

However, to understand the regional context of the Kosovo question, one has to look into the structural elements that determine the perceptions and actions of the relevant regional actors.

The government of Albania proper has long recognized Kosovo's independence, but the Kosovo question does not represent a priority for Tirana, which, in fact, has generally followed a cautious policy, refraining from any major move that might sound

encouragement for the more radical Albanian factions abroad. Albania is highly dependent on foreign aid and this fact by itself excludes that it can change this policy in favour of a more active and substantial support of the Albanian cause abroad. Apart from the declaratory policy, Tirana is likely to continue to coordinate de facto its policy towards Kosovo with the one followed by its major Western supporters. In any case, Albania lacks the capacity to carry out any effective irredentist strategy. The current Albanian government is clearly interested in concentrating on internal matters in an effort to cope with the persistent institutional and political instability as well as with the economic backwardness.

The policy of moderation pursued by Tirana is however rejected by the most militant groups in Kosovo and the Former Republic of Macedonia and in a sense, in the absence of substantial results, is also giving rise to further divisions between the various sections of the Albanian movement. Albania's Foreign Minister Milo has stressed the need for a compromise over Kosovo, whilst prime minister Nano has not ruled out autonomy albeit as a transitional step towards independence. He seems to favour a status for Kosovo equivalent to that of Montenegro or the one that Republika Srpska may acquire in the future.

In general Albania's policy towards Kosovo suffers from a basic contradiction between the need to align itself with the Western approach and the sympathy with the separatist drives of Kosovar Albanians.

The population in Albania proper is also divided in itself. The Southerners are much more inclined to concentrate on internal matters, while people from the mountainous North are asking the government to take a harder line towards Belgrade. These divisions and basic policy contradictions may become a factor of instability should the crisis in Kosovo flare up again or escalate to military confrontation. In this context, the national campaign launched by former President Berisha, whose popularity appears to be on rise, may have, sooner or later, an impact on the government's policy or provoke a further erosion of the links between the Tirana leadership and the Albanian communities abroad.

The situation in the Former Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) is structurally different from the one in Kosovo since there remain some channels of cooperation between the Slav majority and the Albanian minority. A large part of the latter aims to obtain the status of constituent nation within the current borders of Macedonia rather than secession. Furthermore, ethnic divisions are not so territorialised as in Kosovo. However, the temptation to create parallel administration as a step towards partition is on rise among ethnic Albanians. In the last few months the upsurge of nationalist parties and a general radicalization of the Albanian population have continued. This results in part from the lack of substantial concessions on the part of the government concerning both the constitutional changes and the minority rights, in part from the worsening of the economic situation characterized by a high level of unemployment, growing trade deficits and a general precariousness of the financial system. The growing divergences between the parties representing the Albanian minorities and their general radicalization can destabilize the internal political equilibrium in Macedonia. The forthcoming general election may mark the end of the cooperation between the moderate Albanian party and the moderate Slav one which has so far ruled the country together. The radical Macedonia party (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, IMRO) might also become the bigger force in the next Parliament. If this should be coupled with a victory of the radical Albanian party, the risk of a crisis or even confrontation will become very serious.

In the longer run, there are high risks of destabilization associated with the struggle for power that may follow the retirement of President Gligorov due to take place next year. After the recent crisis in Kosovo, Macedonian authorities are even more concerned that the various Albanian communities can enhance their cooperation links. There are also specific threats for Macedonia connected with the Kosovo situation such as a possible successful attempt by the Kosovo paramilitary units to undertake terrorist acts in Macedonia and, in case of an escalation of the crisis, a new wave of refugees whose destabilizing potential represents a major concern for the Macedonia leadership.

A worsening of the Kosovo situation may give rise to a reinforcement of cross-border relations between the various Albanian communities and prompt them to establish stronger cooperation links. However, the divergences between Macedonian Albanians, Kosovars and Albanians proper should not be neglected. The Coordination Council itself, which was set up by the Albanian leadership in 1990, had to adopt a flexible approach and to envisage different solutions to the various problems affecting the Albanian communities due to the different views existing among them.

There is no immediate clear links between Kosovo and the other regions of Serbia where there are interethnic tensions. In particular, the political goal of the Hungarians in Voivodina is no secession but autonomy and, contrary to the Kosovars, they have kept alive important channels of dialogue with the Serbs. The Muslims in Sandzak are also seeking territorial and political autonomy, but, as they are Slavs, there is no direct link and solidarity with the neighbouring Albanian communities. In Montenegro, the Albanians are supporting the new pro-western President Djukanovic and hence their attitude will be mostly determined by the outcome of his effort to defend his prerogatives and consolidates the basis of his consensus in the country.

Generally speaking, the other regional actors have adopted a very cautious policy which is having an overall moderating effect. On 10 March the countries of South Eastern Europe signed a joint Declaration on Kosovo whereby they reaffirmed the same principles on which the policy of the Western countries is based, namely the search for a greater autonomy of the region and at the same time the rejection of any border changes. Not less important, they are coordinating their stance with that of the Contact Group and the EU. It is extremely important that countries like Albania, Greece and Bulgaria maintain this attitude and try to coordinate their actions.

However, these efforts aimed at constructing a stronger regional cooperation may end in failure or not produce the expected results if they are not coupled with a more convincing EU policy.

First of all, the Americans and the Europeans should arrive at a more comprehensive package deal concerning the Balkans based on a new division of burdens and responsibilities in order to implement a more effective conflict prevention action. This is required well beyond the specific case of Kosovo. In Albania we are witnessing a return to an uncoordinated bilateralism with a lack of common action while there is the need to reinforce the multilateral institutional component of the international action. The renewal of the UNPREDEP mission in Macedonia should be accompanied by an enlargement of its mandate. The European contribution to peacekeeping in Macedonia - possibly that of the EU - should also be reinforced. This is now possible after the softening of the tensions between Athens and Skopje. There is also the need to better coordinate the UN and the OSCE action avoiding duplications of tasks. Finally, the Western countries and the EU in particular, should promote a streamlining of the regional cooperation arrangements that have proliferated in the Balkans in recent times.

The initiatives undertaken by the EU so far have been quite limited in scope and not supported by a clear vision. Especially in the Southern Balkans the regional approach appears vital to deal effectively with ethnic tensions. A main objective of the EU policy should be the promotion of specific regional arrangements not limited only to economic measures - as in the case of most of the existing initiatives - but reinforced by a security component. This action in support of regional cooperation should probably involve other institutional actors and instruments such as the OSCE and NATO's Partnership for Peace. In sum, what is needed is the development at the regional level of specific initiatives for the Southern Balkans combining economic aid with political and security cooperation. This is a field where the EU could and should play a greater role.