

Serbia under pressure from the EU regarding Kosovo

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On 9 September the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted the resolution regarding Kosovo which was prepared by Serbia and the EU countries. The contents of the resolutions are very general and prove that there is no agreement on the key issue; that is independence of the province. The elaboration of this resolution was made possible due to the EU putting Belgrade under pressure. The EU threatened to bring Serbia's integration process with the EU to a halt if there was no compromise and promised to consider the accession application if compromise was reached. Through this the EU has forced the Serbian authorities to make concessions. As integration with the EU is a top priority for the Serbian government, it will strive to avoid confrontational rhetoric towards Kosovo and make a pretence of a willingness to establish dialogue with the government in Pristina. This however does not mean a decisive change in Serbia's policy towards Kosovo. Belgrade firmly and consistently dismisses Kosovo's right to independence.

Dispute over the resolution

In response to the verdict of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 22 July this year regarding the legality of Kosovo's declaration of independence, Belgrade submitted to the General Assembly of the United Nations a draft resolution on Kosovo. The document criticised the unilateral declaration of independence as a solution to the dispute and called on both sides to enter into dialogue aimed at solving all "open questions in bilateral relations". The Serbian government assumed that it would thus express a symbolic protest against the verdict of the ICJ and, on the domestic scene, disperse all accusations of a fiasco on the policy towards Kosovo made by the opposition. Due to the fact that the resolution is not binding, its inconsequential political impact, and divisions within the EU over the policy towards Kosovo, Serbia had hoped that the draft resolution would not provoke fierce opposition from EU countries.

Contrary to the assumptions made by the Serbian government, the draft resolution met with criticism by the EU and the US who recognised it as being symptomatic of Belgrade's confrontational policy. The US, which considers the talks about Kosovo's status closed, was against reconsidering this issue in the forum of the United Nations. Furthermore, the EU wanted to avoid the debate over the resolution as it feared the aggravation of divisions already existing (five EU countries do not recognise the independence of Kosovo – Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Romania and Slovakia).

For this reason the foreign ministers of Germany and the UK, respectively Guido Westerwelle and William Hague, threatened during their visit to Belgrade that the process of Serbia's

integration with the EU would be frozen if Serbia did not withdraw from the proposed draft resolution. The head of the EU diplomacy, Catherine Ashton, was actively involved in seeking a compromise with Serbia. As a result, a joint draft was prepared from which the controversial provisions were removed. This document was accepted by all the EU countries and then unanimously adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Serbia's strategy

The adoption of a compromise resolution closes door to Serbia on the possibility of reconsidering the question of Kosovo's status in the forum of the United Nations. Furthermore, the resolution shifts responsibility for supervising the process of normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo to the EU which committed itself to monitoring and facilitating dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The commencement of talks between Serbia and Kosovo is however quite unlikely since none of the parties is ready to seek compromise and the discrepancy in positions is fundamental. The Serbian government, buckling under pressure from the EU regarding the resolution, did not change its stance on the status of Kosovo but was merely forced to make a tactical concession. The top priority for the government in Belgrade is now the acceleration of the integration with the EU and above all the acceptance of the Serbian accession application which will grant Serbia official status of a candidate for EU membership and allow it to obtain related preferences (among them increased financial support). This strategy is beginning to yield results; on 13 September this year the EU General Affairs Council decided that in October it would give its opinion on the Serbian accession application that had been submitted nearly a year earlier. Likely successes in European policy will be discredited by the team of President Boris Tadic on the domestic scene and will serve to muffle the issue of Kosovo in the public debate – an area where the government in Belgrade is at the moment unable to achieve considerable success.