

Europe and America toy with Kosovo's fate

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Recently, Western statements on Kosovo have acquired an almost panicky sense of urgency.

Talking about a problem that has been brewing since NATO bombed Yugoslavia eight years ago, Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said the Security Council must make a decision on Kosovo's final status within 10 days and urged Russia to cooperate. "I think the time has come for Russia to take a step in the right direction on this issue," he added.

Christina Gallach, a spokeswoman for European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, was even more adamant. She said that if Russia rejected the Kosovo independence plan, Brussels would take matters into its own hands and make an appropriate decision.

The sensitive reader may think that all Russia has been doing up to now was making bad decisions or that the UN Security Council, which gives its permanent members the right to a veto, should be replaced with the "more responsible" European Union.

But in reality the situation is different. Russia has rejected the previous, second draft of the UN Security Council resolution on Kosovo because of its wording and for more general reasons. Based on the plan drawn up by Marti Ahtisaari, the UN special envoy for Kosovo, the Western plan grants the Serbian province "internationally supervised" independence. Importantly, Russia is not alone on the Security Council – to some extent its position on Kosovo is supported by China, Indonesia and South Africa.

Moscow was absolutely against the draft's provision on automatic implementation of the Ahtisaari plan, under which Kosovo was to become independent if the talks between Belgrade and Pristina failed to produce results within 120 days. Russian diplomats do not believe in automatic solutions when it comes to centuries-long contradictions between the principles of national self-determination and territorial integrity.

Moreover, Vitaly Churkin, Russian ambassador to the United Nations, pointed out that with the promise of independence after four months regardless of the outcome, the Kosovo Albanians would not engage in serious negotiations.

These are important issues, but they are details. The main point is that Moscow will object to any version unless it is backed both by Pristina and Belgrade. Or, to make this statement positive, Moscow will support any decision if the conflicting parties agree on it.

"Any other decision will not get past the Security Council," emphasized Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with his country's veto in mind.

Russia is convinced that the idea of Kosovo's independence is far-fetched. Nobody had even mentioned it before NATO bombed Yugoslavia in 1999. At that time, the discussion centered on various parameters of autonomy and a change in Yugoslavia's federal structure.

The bombing dramatically affected Kosovo's demographic make-up – the Serbian population has dwindled from more than 30% to less than 10% and been driven into a ghetto. This fact questions the legitimacy of the province's current authorities. There are grounds to say that the NATO bombing has largely provoked them into channeling Albanian nationalist sentiments into a demand for independence.

Breaking off part of Serbia without its consent will violate its territorial integrity, thereby creating a very dangerous precedent. There are more than 200 situations where this principle is at odds with national self-determination. It is difficult to imagine how much misfortune and blood a UN Security Council resolution would bring if it were interpreted by some leaders as a green light to receive as much independence as they can swallow. The draft's references to the unique character of the Kosovo situation do not change anything.

This is why Russia is going to work for a political solution that will be acceptable to both Belgrade and Pristina. It will use its veto as a last resort. Moscow believes that the resolution of the highly sensitive and complicated Kosovo issue requires much more time than it has been given.

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