

Can Austria untie the Kosovo knot?

By Wolfgang Petritsch

23.02.2006 / 00:00 CET

The death of Kosovo's President Ibrahim Rugova robbed Kosovo of a brave and moderate man. But, even if he said it in a friendly way, Rugova's unswerving goal was independence - precisely what Belgrade refuses to concede.

No nation surrenders territory without pain. Giving up Kosovo is to abandon a region bound up with national, and indeed religious, identity. But is there any other way out?

The murdered former prime minister Zoran Djindjic had started to think what is, for many Serbs, still unthinkable, that Kosovo and its two million ethnic Albanians are in truth a burden for Serbia and likely to be in crisis for decades.

My prediction is that, by the end of 2006, and with determined input from the Austrian presidency this spring, there is a real chance of an international solution; a de facto separation has already taken place, and so-called status talks are in process under United Nations auspices.

The development of a functioning model for decentralisation seems to me key to the next stage. International legal separation from Serbia will stop short of unconditional independence for Kosovo. Maintaining this essential interim state will require both Albanian and Serbian realism and ongoing European sensitivity and commitment, hopefully not for as long as in Bosnia. But right now it will require all the diplomatic skills of Martti Ahtisaari, the UN mediator.

When Kosovo's final status is negotiated in a few months' time we need to be prepared for potentially furious reactions by radical elements. The EU as a whole must be prepared to cope with the ensuing challenges and accept that resolving the Kosovo issue and stabilising the region will require a joint European effort.

There is no point in pretending that such a commitment does not mean a heavy political as well as military responsibility for some years to come. Maintaining security and the implementation of minority rights is central. Any final status must notably include a special arrangement for Kosovo's Serbian Orthodox religious sites to guarantee access for all Serbs. And those who wish to return - Serbs or other minorities - must have a right to do so and to lead a decent life.

More generally, public institutions need to be built up and these must be compatible with European standards including in the sensitive fields of the police and the judiciary.

What if we fail to spread the values which have brought peace, economic and, gradually, political and security integration to 25 European nations? I see a real danger that Kosovo could become a hub for organised crime and people- and drug-trafficking. We have very practical reasons for nipping this in the bud.

But at a deeper level I believe that if we are successful in bringing peace and democracy to South-Eastern Europe - it is difficult, but do-able - it will provide a new

dynamic for the EU as a whole.

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