

## **Ahtisaari's Package and the Russian Box of President Putin**

**By Xhavit Shala**

Kosova<sup>1</sup> is fast approaching the last kilometers of its marathon towards independence. Ahtisaari's package, presented in the end of January, while making no formal mentioning of the term independence has clearly prepared the way. The status process will lead to an internationally supervised independence for Kosova. What is important is that Kosova after one century of repression will finally be separated even de jure from Serbia.<sup>2</sup>

Besides Serbia, Russia has also entered the stage as a powerful player on the Kosova issue and is playing openly against the interests of Albanians. Since last fall, the Russian President, Putin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov, and a series of other senior officials have with growing pressure expressed their opposition to Kosova's independence. Russia claims that Kosova's independence without the consent of Serbia would open the "Pandora's box." The Russians, however, hardly believe this themselves. And if Europe was to doubt even for a second the independence of Kosova and decided to put it off it, this would only help conserve the same problem for another hundred years. It now appears that Europe and the West have recognized that the status-quo is dangerous and any failure to determine the status of Kosova would carry great risks.

An analysis of the facts shows that Russia is using the threat of Pandora's Box as a propaganda tool that will help them disguise another box, that of President Putin, the strategy to reclaim the former Soviet influence and weight. And Europe has already started to feel the effects of that box. The use of energy as a tool of exerting political pressure, the use of nuclear technology to assassinate a single individual and the threat of using the veto power at the UN Security Council to oppose Kosova's independence, are only a few of the tools contained in Putin's box. More surprises are to follow.

"The balance of powers has changed drastically since the bombing campaign in 1999 and now Russia, full of confidence, is looking for ways to showcase its force and independence,"<sup>3</sup> William Montgomery, the former U.S. Ambassador to Belgrade says. Since last fall now, Russia has openly demonstrated this new approach. Only a few days ago, on February 12, speaking at the annual Security Conference in Munich, President Putin made efforts to discourage any international attempt to resolve the Kosova status. "Let us not take the place of God and let them (the Serbs and the Albanians) resolve their own problems themselves. ...If one of the parties feels defrauded, then the problem will

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<sup>2</sup> The article was first published as an editorial in the daily "Korrieri" 17.02.2007.  
(<http://www.acnss.com/html/studime/170207putin.htm>)

<sup>3</sup> William Montgomery : The Kosovar r dilemma of the Bush administration –Serb radio B92 interview.(  
Danas, January 20, 2007- <http://www.danas.co.yu/20070120/vikend3.html#0>)

be prolonged for centuries," Putin said at the event.<sup>4</sup> Putin himself does not believe it when he says that the parties should work out the issue themselves. Had they been able to resolve the matter themselves, this issue would not have lasted for more than a hundred years.

Russia's position on Kosova has actually hurt Serbia's own long term interests. Counting on Russian support, the Serbs have gone to the negotiations table with a false sense of confidence that has not allowed them to pay serious considerations to the talks and it is keeping them from providing serious attention to protecting the interests of the Serbs who live in Kosova. The Russian and European officials themselves have been surprised by the self-confidence of the Serb politicians. "It is unusual that such a small people will swear for its charismatic leaders and refuse to understand that is only a part of much bigger system," Marti Ahtisaari said recently as he was leaving Belgrade.

Rather than protecting Serb interests, the Russians want to make the most out of this situation for themselves. Russia's position presents a serious problem for Kosova, however. This is a matter that deserves very serious attention especially in view of the consequences that it could have on the level of security in the field. The failure to achieve an agreement with Russia at the Security Council may potentially delay the resolution of the Kosova status.<sup>5</sup> The Russians may attempt to thwart the draft resolution supported by the Europeans and derail Kosova's progress towards independence. The 1244 resolution would then remain in force and Kosova would continue to be run by a UNMIK that has lost the support of the local population.

The United States and other countries could then proceed to recognizing the independence of Kosova unilaterally. Other states, however, and possibly even the EU could hesitate to recognize the independence of Kosova under the pretext of respecting international law as the 1244 resolution would still be in force. Were the U.S. to threaten to withdraw from Kosova due to the increasing weight of its obligations elsewhere, the threat of violence erupting in Kosova would increase significantly. The national minorities and the UNMIK could become the targets of violent actions, especially given the recent irresponsible behavior that led to the killing of three unarmed protesters.<sup>6</sup> "It is not to be excluded that even American troops could become a target of the anger generated among Albanians by the failure to move forward toward independence," William Montgomery, the former U.S. Ambassador to Belgrade told B92 radio. "In any event, the KFOR forces would not be able to keep the violence under control and the consequences would be very bad."

In spite of Montgomery's fear, neither Russia nor any other of European ally of Russia will ever succeed in sowing enmity between the Albanians and the United States,

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<sup>4</sup> "VOA "; BBC: 12.2.2007

<sup>5</sup> The developments that followed demonstrated that Russia in cooperation with the Serbs were trying to push the status talks toward the trap of indefinite negotiations.

<sup>6</sup> On February 10, 2007, a Rumanian police unit killed three demonstrators of the Self-determination movement in Kosova.

between the Kosovar population and the American and other NATO troops in Kosova. The situation however calls for greater transparency and engagement on the part of the Kosovar political class and the negotiating team. They must work to convince their citizens that it is very important to maintain calm and avoid any provocations that could harm their progress towards independence. They must tell the people of Kosova that they are making true progress toward achieving the proclamation of the independent State of Kosova and assure the public that they enjoy the necessary international support. It is our belief that the U.S. and the EU will not only be able to maintain their unity on resolving the status of Kosova but will also find ways to neutralize Russia's opposition to it. This is the only way for the West to deal successfully with any other surprise that Putin may bring out of his box.