

The Hong Kong Option was Buried in Rambuje

By Xhavit Shala

During¹ the last meeting of the Kosovar and Serb delegations in Vienna,² on November 5, 2007³, the Serbs put forth a proposal that would resolve the Kosova status by applying the Hong Kong model. This presents nothing more than a reproduction of the old Serb thesis for «substantial autonomy» for Kosova. The Serb negotiators do not want any one to remind them that the Hong Kong model was buried by Milosevic⁴ way back in 1999.

The former Serb Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Drashkovic⁵ admitted to the same in an interview last week. According to him, in Rambuje, Belgrade was presented with a document that would have accorded Kosova “substantial autonomy” in the frame of the Yugoslav borders. Milosevic turned it down. “According to that document, Kosova would have been granted substantial autonomy within the brooders of Yugoslavia and Serbia,” Drashkovic said. According to the document that the Western countries offered Milosevic in Rambuje, Serbia would have maintained about two thousand soldiers and three thousand policemen in Kosova. There would have been two parallel systems of justice, one for the Albanians, and one for the Serbs. NATO troops in cooperation with Serb forces would disarm the KLA and collect the weapons in Kosova.

But Serbia lost the chance to keep Kosova with the Hong Kong model there and then. The current Serb leadership has forgotten that the proposal was valid when there had been no NATO bombs and no ethnic cleansing carried out by the Serb repressive system, which lead to the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Albanians. These two factors make any return to the Hong Kong model impossible. Serbia is the defeated party in the war against NATO and the KLA.

Even from a formal point of view, there is no parallel between Hong Kong and the case of Kosova. Hong Kong serves as a model of a system that allows the functioning of two different political systems within one single state, a system that most likely will not last long. On the case of Kosova there could be no parallel with Hong Kong as both Serbia and Kosova have developed a Western type democratic model. On the other hand, the population of Hong Kong is Chinese like the rest of China. Unlike Hong Kong, over 90

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² The article was published in the daily “Koha Jonë”, 15.11.2007

³ November 5, 2007 the Albanian Kosova delegation and the Serb one met in Vienna for their consecutive round of talks in the presence of the Contact Group countries.

⁴ The Rambuje talks began in February 6, 1999.

⁵ Drashkovic statement was published in the Novi Sad paper "Gragjanski List," republished in the Kosova daily “Express” and then taken by the Tirana daily “Koha Jonë” in October 21, 2007.

per cent of the population of Kosova is Albanian who have nothing in common with Serbs. There would be a parallel that could be drawn with Hong Kong, only if it were for Albania that was seeking unification with Kosova. The introduction of the Hong Kong model could only serve to incite Albanian nationalist circles to seek the unification of Kosova with Albania.

The Hong Kong alternative was contemplated by the Serbs for months before being introduced to the public through Belgrade's daily Blic. In order for the proposal to stick, it was introduced as tabled by the internationals. "A source near the Contact Group said that one of the options discussed among international circles is the resolution of the Kosova status by using the Hong Kong model," the daily Blic said. Serbia hopes that the cover of an international proposal would make the Albanians to consider it more seriously. But "Kosova is sui generis. It is not Hong Kong, it is a special case that will be treated accordingly by the international community,"⁶ the Kosova President Fatmir Sejdiu said on the day of the publication of the news.

Not only the Kosovars but the Contact Group negotiating Trio also warned the Serbs not to introduce the Hong Kong model into the negotiations. "I do not believe that the Hong Kong model is viable for Kosova" Wolfgang Ischinger, the EU representative in the negotiations, told Moscow's daily "Komersant."⁷

Despite the label, the new proposal is only a sugared up version of the old Serb thesis of substantial autonomy known otherwise as "more than autonomy, less than independence." The essence of the Serb intentions is to preserve their sovereignty over Kosova. While in Vienna, on November 5, Kostunica made no effort to hide this objective. "The Hong Kong model ensures the preservation of Serb sovereignty and the realization of the aspirations for self governance," he said. It is not a coincidence that on two occasions the Serbs have made reference to Chinese relations, first with Taiwan⁸ and then Hong Kong, as two options that could be applied on Kosova. The comparisons with Taiwan and Hong Kong also aim at ensuring the Chinese vote on the Security Council.

While the Hong Kong model was made public in the daily Blic, the negotiating trio submitted to the parties a material with 14 points. This plan that as usual contained ambiguous language was very close to the Serb proposal of Hong Kong. It would not resolve the status of Kosova, but would only make sure that it is delayed as the Russians have been requesting. It is likely that the Russian exerted considerable pressure in preparing the 14 points.

⁶ Statement made by Kosova President Sejdiu in September 21, following a meeting with UN Special Representative for Human Rights, Hina Jilani.

⁷ Information released by the Macedonian News Agency MIA and Radio Free Europe on October 9, 2007.

⁸ Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Vuk Draskovic, while in a visit to China in October 2005 said, "Kosova is as important for Serbia as Taiwan is for China. There are not two Frances, two Italy's, two Chinas or two Serbias and that's why there can not be two Albanias."

Another plan that had elements of the Hong Kong model was made public on October 30, 2007 in an Albanian daily.⁹ Allegedly of American authorship, the plan foresaw a freezing of the status process, a referendum to be held on January 5, 2020, full powers for the government of Kosova, a robust financial assistance by the EU and the US that could reach up to seven billion Euros annually, free trade areas and a continued NATO security presence. The American origin of the plan was never confirmed and the Kosova Prime Minister Ceku rejected the plan outright.

When analyzed, the Western origin of the plan becomes unlikely. The U.S. has openly expressed that it is opposed to preserving the status-quo. The large hypothetical financial assistance would also be very hard to come by. The war in Iraq has put financial pressures on the US and has reduced the availability of funds. It is likely that this is a Russian inspired model as they are the ones who insist on freezing the issue for an indefinite period of time. The plan could have possibly been considered by the Kosovar party if it provided for a final legal divorce with Serbia and if it cast the Hong Kong model in the context of relations with the European Union.

The Hong Kong model was buried once and forever in Rambuje. By submitting these plans, the Serbs and their allies are only trying to buy time and postpone for as much as possible the resolution of the final status. They hope that possible changes in the international geopolitical situation and the new strategy pursued by Russia could change the situation. In such circumstances, any further postponement in resolving the status could present a serious threat to the expected independence of Kosova. All that is left is for the unilateral declaration of the independence of Kosova with the prior understanding that other states would recognize it.

⁹ The article was published in the daily Tema.

