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SERBIA-KOSOVO: Lasting peace is needed to join the EU

Ignoring the past keeps us farther from the future: Serbia and Kosovo can only move forward as two equal neighbors in the Balkans

By Hon. Faton Tony Bislimi, PhD, for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (09.02.2022) – If there is one lesson the international community has learned from the wars in the Balkans is that those who perpetrated most of the crimes have always played

the victim. For a country such as Serbia that pretends to join the European Union and share the European values to still pretend that another country such as Kosovo, recognized as a sovereign nation by over 115 nations worldwide, is somehow still their territory, is beyond surrealistic. It is a blatant example of politics of smear and fear still well and alive in what used to be a country led by a president (S. Milosevic) who died in jail in the Hague standing trial for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.

Anyone reading the portion on Kosovo from the interview that the Serbian Foreign Minister Selakovic gave for the [Diplomat Magazine](#) (published January 2, 2022) can easily see that Serbia's political leadership is still living in the past and using misinformation, bold untrue statements against Kosovo, while portraying themselves as the victim and Kosovo as the aggressor. Unfortunately for them, however, real facts are too stubborn to be changed or modified as we see them fit. The world knows of Serbia's crimes against innocent civilians in Kosovo during the 1998-99 war which required NATO's intervention to stop Belgrade's genocidal march against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

The sooner the Serb ruling elite accepts the new reality and indeed takes responsibility for the crimes of the past by committing to genuinely work to finally send home to Kosovo over one thousand missing people still hidden in mass graves in Serbia, the better the chances for lasting peace in the region and for an acceptable comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. The Prishtina-Belgrade dialogue process facilitated by the EU and supported by the US has been ongoing for over a decade now with almost no implementable and practical results. This, in most part, is because of Serbia's failure to recognize anything Kosovo-related, much less agreements between the two countries as equals.

Indeed, for anyone in Belgrade to speak about the 'misery in which Serbs in Kosovo live' is to add insult to injury.

Everyone who has ever read one single issue of an internationally credible report on human rights and treatment of minorities in Kosovo (be it by the US Department of State, the EC Progress Report, HRW, etc.) will have understood that minorities in Kosovo, and especially the Serbs, enjoy the highest standards of ethnic rights in the region and beyond. Kosovo made sure that it enshrined the upholding of such rights in its own constitution as the highest law of the land.

On the other hand, the very opposite is true in Serbia. Their treatment of the ethnic Albanian minority in southern Serbia, commonly known as the Presheva Valley, where over one-hundred thousand ethnic Albanians live in three key municipalities of Bujanoc, Presheva, and Medvegja, resembles a sophisticated and modernized Nazi-style ghetto system. The Government of Serbia heavily discriminates against the Presheva Valley ethnic Albanian municipalities and as a result, this is not only Serbia's – but also Europe's – poorest region today. Moreover, to ethnically cleanse this area of Albanians, Serbia has been implementing an unconstitutional law (even as per their constitution!) in the Presheva Valley based on which they continuously remove from the civil registry ethnic Albanians who happen to not be present at their declared home addresses when state officials visit randomly. Once removed from the civil registry, they lose their residence and citizenship rights, consequently lowering the number of Albanians in that region officially.

Kosovo shall not have any problem establishing the Serb Majority Municipalities Association as long as such an entity is within the legal framework of the constitution and applicable laws of Kosovo. The requirement that this association is in accordance with Kosovo's laws is clearly stipulated in the Brussels Agreement of 2013 as well. The problem here is the unjustified demand by Belgrade that such an association have executive powers, thereby diminishing Kosovo's unitary status as a Republic—a demand that Kosovo

cannot accept, and that the international community does not support. Hence, the stalemate in the dialogue process is solely due to Serbia's unjust demands.

Lasting peace and sustainable prosperity in the Balkans region can be achieved only when we all look at ourselves in the mirror and accept our share of the burden from the past while extending our hand of friendship to our neighbors. The devastating wars in the Balkans have all begun with Serbia, and so shall the reconciliation process. Serbia must act first and they can do so by significantly improving their treatment of the ethnic Albanian minority within their borders! Kosovo will then follow suit!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Faton Tony Bislimi, PhD, is an Executive Board Member of the Albanian American Civic League (est. 1989 in New York) and a former Member of Parliament of the Republic of Kosovo. An American and Canadian educated scholar (having received degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in the world such as Harvard University where he earned his Master's in Public Administration and International Development), he was born and raised in Kosovo, and survived the 1998-99 war as a teenage refugee separated from his family. A laureate of many international academic and leadership prizes and awards, an author and editor of several books, refereed journal articles and book chapters, Dr. Bislimi is an expert of international development and international relations.

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