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## **Changing strategy in the solution to the Kosovo issue: Standards before the Agreement**

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The next year marks twenty years since the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. You get tired simply by counting to twenty, and let alone living twenty years in the uncertainty of the Serbs in Kosovo all these years.

All these years, Serbia has not come out with a single plan for resolving the Kosovo issue that would be at all applicable and therefore considered by the international community or by the Kosovo Albanians, because the solutions offered by our negotiators mostly did not correspond to the historical moment. They would usually be late with the proposed solutions for at least 5-10 years, sometimes even more.

On the other hand, Serbia has long been unable to negotiate solutions offered by the international community. We would accept a variation on those same proposals later, when we showed readiness to participate in the negotiations. Time passed, we lost a lot and we did not really get anything new.

This is why the question arises: what will we say to the future generations when they ask us how we have solved the problem of Kosovo in the last twenty years? What did we achieve in that period and what did we learn? Would it have been worse or better if we had not done anything?

When it comes to Kosovo, we need to be aware that there are no substantially new proposals for a solution that would not lead us into a political adventure with unprecedented consequences for our society and peace in the region. By signing the Brussels Agreement, Serbia recognized the constitutional and legal system of Kosovo, which implies the closure of Serbian institutions in Kosovo and integration of Serbs into the Kosovo society. This is an irreversible process today, and we can only work on improving the existing solutions within the context provided by the Agreement.

Another reality is that sooner or later Serbia will have to sign **the Comprehensive, Legally binding Normalisation Agreement with Kosovo**. Any postponement of work on this agreement is contrary to our national interests, and it will have a particularly negative impact on the position and survival of Serbs in Kosovo. While it is not realistic to expect that the Agreement on Comprehensive Normalization of Relations will be fundamentally different from the solutions offered within the framework of the Brussels Agreement, its development represents an excellent (and probably the last) opportunity to regulate relations between Serbia and Kosovo in a quality manner.

### **What has to be done?**

Regardless of the model for the final solution to the state and legal status of Kosovo, in regulating relations with Kosovo, Serbia should focus on meeting the following goals:

#### **1. Finding a solution that guarantees safety and prosperity for the Serbs in Kosovo**

Within the framework of this goal, it is necessary to adopt the principle: **“Standards before the Comprehensive, Legally binding Normalisation Agreement with Kosovo”**, which would include resolving the key issues of importance to Serbia and the Serb community in Kosovo, prior to the signing of the Agreement.

The key issues would target the following areas:

- Total security for Serb community in Kosovo;
- Creating legal and institutional solutions for socio-economic development of Serb community in Kosovo;
- Full implementation of the Brussels Agreement in relation to the Community of Serb Municipalities, obtaining personal documents, etc.;
- Protection of cultural and historical heritage;
- Providing autonomy for monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo using the model of the Holy Mountain;
- Solution for the private property issues;
- Solution for issues of state property and foreign debt;
- Other issues considered to be a priority.

The "Standards Before the Agreement" principle does not in any way mean postponing the deadline for signing the Comprehensive, Legally binding Normalisation Agreement with Kosovo, or blackmailing the other party or the international community through solutions that cannot be acceptable to them, but proactive work through seeking acceptable modalities that would ensure security and prosperity of Serbs in Kosovo.

Within this goal, Serbia should also adopt a Strategy for the preservation of the Serb community in Kosovo that would include programmes and measures followed by concrete financial instruments that would be transparent and implemented in accordance with legal procedures in Kosovo. The Strategy should include programmes for social protection, economic development, agricultural development, environmental protection, local infrastructure development, community cooperation, youth policy, culture and sport, etc.

Serbia should also conduct a functional analysis of its institutions in Kosovo and insists on maintaining competencies in the field of **health, education and social protection**. In other areas, Serbia should support and assist the integration of the existing public institutions into the Kosovo system, where it is possible. It is particularly important to support the development of efficient institutions in the area of local self-government, the police and the judiciary system. The issue of solving redundant public sector employees should also be seriously addressed through a program that would make it possible for these people not to move from Kosovo.

As part of the realization of this goal, the Serbian Parliament should adopt **the Declaration on the Protection of the Rights of Citizens of Serbia from Kosovo and Metohija** which would guarantee the constitutional right to citizenship, personal and travel documents, and any other right that applies to other citizens of Serbia.

## 2. Building trust between Albanians and Serbs

Peace and security of the Western Balkans depends largely on the relationship between the two largest populations, Serbs and Albanians. It is of strategic interest to Serbia to work on relaxing the relations and building trust between the two nations in order to achieve the conditions for creating lasting peace. In addition, one should not overlook the fact that the safety and quality of life of the Serbs in Kosovo depend the most on their relations with the Albanians. Banning of sports and cultural events, as well as verbal provocations by state officials certainly do not support the normalization of relations and building of the trust between the two nations.

It is necessary to change the tactic of action that would also involve changing the previous communication manner about Kosovo. It is wrong to constantly present the Albanians as enemies, and the agreements reached as the necessary evil that came as a result of intense talks in difficult circumstances. Communication in the public should be done in a way to highlight the positive sides of the cooperation between the two sides, and to emphasize the benefits from the agreements reached.

Building trust between nations is best achieved through cooperation in the field of culture, sports, tourism, youth work, etc. Therefore, it is necessary to come up with measures that will support the development of such activities.

### 3. Strengthening economic cooperation and development of joint infrastructure

Serbia has a significant presence in the Kosovo market with the prospect of further expansion. That is why we should work on creating the conditions for greater presence of our businesses in this market, including the possibility of investing in the Kosovo economy. The cooperation between the two Chambers of Commerce, which takes place within the framework of the Berlin Process, gives good results, but it is necessary to provide greater institutional support to their initiatives and to solve the problems of businesses.

Also, it is necessary to work more actively on infrastructure connections between Serbia and Kosovo, primarily in the construction of the Nis-Pristina highway, the railroad Kraljevo - Kosovska Mitrovica - Kosovo Polje and the Belgrade-Pristina airline.

### 4. European perspective of Serbia and Kosovo

The European Commission has recently adopted the Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans, which gave Serbia the opportunity to join the European Union by 2025. This is a unique opportunity to pull Serbia out of the periphery and bring it towards the future that leads to the prosperity of the nation. It is of strategic interest to Serbia also to support the European perspective of Kosovo, as this will stabilize the region and guarantee the protection of rights of the Serb community.

In the end, it should also be mentioned that Serbia has again found itself in the historical crossroads. A smart strategy can set a good basis for resolving the situation in Kosovo and joining the European Union. Looking back, whenever we are in a similar situation, our political elite was unable to understand the geopolitical context and the historical importance of the moment, nor did it have the political courage to accept compromise solutions. The consequences of this manner are visible both in Serbia and Kosovo, and in particular they are especially destructive for the population of Kosovo Serbs.

In Serbia's recent history, there has never been a more stable political situation for finding a solution to the problem of Kosovo than today. This process will certainly not be simple and painless, but we have no right to miss this opportunity as all the previous ones. **The future counts on us!**