
ASSESSMENT OF THE DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS OF THE CONTACT GROUP TO STOP SERBIAN ATROCITIES IN KOSOVO IN EARLY 1998

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Abstract: The situation in Kosovo at the end of 1997 and the beginning of 1998 was extremely tense with the open threat of a war between the Serbian army and police against the KLA formations. The Serbian police had begun a series of attacks against Albanian villages since the beginning of 1998. Ethnic Albanians, who at that time constituted slightly more than 90% of the population of Kosovo, were demanding their independence in a series of demonstrations and protests. The Belgrade government was using brutal violence to suppress these demands. In response to these Serbian actions, the KLA began to intensify its guerrilla operations. The international community was divided on how to respond to developments in Kosovo. Russia accused the KLA of worsening the situation, drawing attention to the attacks by the KLA, which it called a terrorist organization. The United States accused Belgrade of the violence in Kosovo. The United States argued that the international response should not exclude military pressure. The Italians and Germans supported diplomatic pressure on both sides, so as a compromise, we have the lifting of a series of sanctions imposed by the Contact Group on the Yugoslav Federation. After the fighting at the end of February 1998 in the villages of Likoshan and Qirez, which resulted in the killing of Albanian civilians in retaliation for the actions of the KLA, and especially after the massacre of the Jashari families by police and military forces on 5, 6 and 7 March, the international community, through the Contact Group, began a series of diplomatic actions to prevent new escalations of the situation, which seemed inevitable. Among the actions that should be assessed is the statement made at the Joint Conference of Foreign Ministers of the Contact Group held on 9 March in London, in which it was underlined that the series of violence and violations of civil rights and freedoms, and especially the killings of civilians in Kosovo last week, cannot be considered simply as an internal matter. Further in this statement it is understood that an agreement had been reached for the Chief Prosecutor of the War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia to investigate anyone who may have been involved in violations of international humanitarian law. The most important action is the joint statement of the Contact Group, issued at its meeting held in London on 9 March 1998, which raised alarming concerns about recent developments in Kosovo, clearly addressing the responsibility of the FRY of Yugoslavia and announcing a series of actions to prevent further escalation of the situation, which will be extensively described in this paper.

Keywords: crimes, murders, attempts, statements, actions

1. INTRODUCTION

The situation in Kosovo in late 1997 and early 1998 was extremely tense with the threat of open war between the Serbian army and police against KLA formations. Serbian police had begun a series of attacks on Albanian villages since early 1998. Ethnic Albanians, who at the time constituted just over 90% of Kosovo's population, were demanding their independence in a series of demonstrations and protests. The Belgrade government was using brutal violence to suppress these demands. In response to these Serbian actions, the KLA began to intensify its guerrilla operations. The international community was divided on how to respond to developments in Kosovo. Russia accused the KLA of aggravating the situation, drawing attention to the attacks by the KLA, which it called a terrorist organization. The United States accused Belgrade of the violence in Kosovo. The United States argued that the international response should not exclude military pressure. The Italians and Germans supported diplomatic pressure on both sides, so as a compromise, we have the lifting of a number of sanctions imposed by the Contact Group on the Yugoslav Federation. After the fighting in late February 1998 in the villages of Likoshan and Qirez, which resulted in the killing of Albanian civilians in retaliation for the actions of the KLA, and especially after the massacre of the Jashari families by police and military forces on 5, 6 and 7 March, the international community, through the Contact Group, began a series of diplomatic actions to prevent further escalation of the situation, which seemed inevitable. Among the actions that should be appreciated is the statement made at the Joint Conference of Foreign Ministers of the Contact Group held on 9 March in London, which underlined that the series of violence and violations of civil rights and freedoms, and in particular the killings of civilians in Kosovo last week, cannot be considered a purely internal matter.

Serbian military and MUP forces surrounded the Albanian village of Prekaz in the early hours of 5 March 1998. The operation had been launched as a counter-reaction to KLA attacks that had left Serbian policemen dead a few days

earlier. The aim was to capture Adem Jashari, a known KLA commander. After the Jashar tribe failed to comply with the demand to hand over Adem, Serbian forces, using artillery, tanks, small arms, and helicopter gunships, opened fire on the Jashars in their steppes, indiscriminately killing at least fifty-eight Kosovo Albanians, including women and children. As news of the massacre spread in Kosovo, thousands of Albanians volunteered for the KLA. Credible reports of Serbian police detentions, torture, mass executions, and massacres were increasingly numerous throughout 1998. Following the Serbian campaign in Kosovo, the Contact Group launched a frantic diplomatic effort to end the violence without international military intervention. (Pardew W., 2021, 199).

2. DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS OF THE CONTACT GROUP TO STOP SERBIAN ATROCITIES IN KOSOVO IN EARLY 1998

Since the beginning of 1998, the Contact Group initially established several principles regarding the situation in Kosovo at its meeting on January 8 in Washington, as follows:

1. It is up to the authorities in Belgrade and the Albanian leaders of Kosovo, to exercise their influence in the interest of stability, to support peaceful solutions for the peaceful future of their peoples. The Contact Group will support solutions that respect democratic principles.
2. As a first step to reduce tensions, the start of dialogue is essential
3. The Contact Group does not support independence, nor does it support the continuation of the status quo. The Contact Group supports the advancement of Kosovo's status within the Yugoslav Federation. (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 95)
4. The Contact Group condemns violence by both parties to achieve political goals and calls on the parties to choose peaceful ways to overcome the difficulties they face.

Article I. The series of meetings of the Contact Group on the topic of Kosovo continued with the meeting of Foreign Ministers on 25 February 1998 in Moscow, where, in the spirit of the joint statement of the Foreign Ministers of the Contact Group on 24 September 1997 in Washington and the aforementioned statement of 8 January 1998, concern was reiterated here for the situation in Kosovo and the security of the region, and on this occasion the Contact Group reiterated its already well-known position that it will not support independence or the maintenance of the status quo. (Statement on Kosovo, 1998, https://www.ohr.int/ohr_archive/statement-of-kosovo-moscow-2521998-2/)

Even more clearly in the meetings preceding this meeting, it was emphasized that the solution to the Kosovo problem must be based on the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and that the rights of Albanians must be taken into account in accordance with the standards of the OSCE, the Helsinki principles and the UN Charter. (Statement by the Contact Group, 1998, https://www.ohr.int/ohr_archive/statement-of-kosovo-moscow-2521998-2/)

The escalation of the situation on the ground and the increase in the number of deaths during February 1998 seemed to deny the possibility of achieving a peaceful solution as proposed by the Contact Group. The massacre of civilians in the villages of Likoshan and Qirez (February 28, 1998), where 16 civilians and 4 Serbian policemen died, as well as the rampant police violence against a peaceful demonstration in Pristina, attracted the attention of US embassy officials who came to Pristina and visited the Gllgovc region, after which they issued a press statement on March 2, in which, among other things, they called on the parties to enter into an unconditional dialogue, among other things, the US expected the Serbian police to act with maximum caution and the Serbian army not to take any action that would lead to a new escalation, any further step of violence that would only isolate Belgrade from the International Community. (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 97)

On March 5, 1998, there was a statement by the North Atlantic Council (NATO) expressing concern about the violence of the Serbian police in the last few days. The Council called on the parties to reduce tensions, in particular the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, to take preventive action to avoid a worsening of the situation. NATO and the international community (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 98)

After the attacks of the Serbian army on the village of Prekaz, American diplomacy began to move more seriously. Secretary of State Madeline Albright, in a meeting she had in Rome on March 7, 1998 with Foreign Minister Lloberto Dini, together with the host, addressed journalists, where for the first time in the journalists' question she answered that the US would not sit back and watch what would happen in Kosovo, saying that "we both talked about the common and cooperative approach to prepare for the next meeting of the CG that will be held in a few days in London". For the first time, Secretary Albright said that we have discussed and from the American perspective we condemn the violence and we discussed that Milosevic is primarily responsible for causing it and we believe that we can peacefully approach policies that are right for the people of Kosovo. (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 99)

A day later (March 8, 1998) About the explosive situation in Kosovo, especially after the fighting and police violence, Albright had a similar press conference with German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel in Bonn. In fact, to talk about Kosovo, the Secretary had undertaken a diplomatic tour in Ukraine, Italy, Germany, then she would go to Paris to end in London at the GK meeting. The highlights of this press conference were stronger messages for Belgrade. "We must force Belgrade to behave in a spirit of greater compromise in the region." Dialogue is the only way. Not independence and status quo. A special status that leads Kosovo towards autonomy is a good basis for a lasting peace, Kinkel will declare. While Albright for her part was more direct. Among other things, she addressed the responsibility for the situation more to Belgrade. "We discussed joint efforts to immediately end the discriminatory violence perpetrated by Serbian security forces in Kosovo. We agreed to work together for a successful Contact Group meeting tomorrow in London. I also noted that the escalation of violence has had consequences for Albania and the former Federal Republic of Macedonia". (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 100) Statement by Secretary of State Albright, March 9, 1998 Contact Group Ministerial, London,

"Let me begin by thanking Secretary Cook for hosting this session of the Contact Group on Kosovo. I am very pleased to be with my colleagues from Germany, France, Italy, and Russia. The situation in Kosovo today is dire. There is no dialogue. President Milosevic has reneged on his promises to us and to the Albanian people. Instead, Serbian security forces have launched a campaign of indiscriminate violence that has claimed the lives of many innocent people. Once again, President Milosevic is playing with fire. Once again, he has tried to solve his problems not with the force of argument, but with the argument of brutal force". (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 103-104) Excerpt from the press conference of the Contact Group Foreign Ministers, 9 March 1998

The host of the conference, the UK Foreign Secretary R. Cook, spoke on behalf of the CG ministers. "Good evening. We have had a full and lengthy discussion of the situation in Kosovo. We have met here today at short notice, at my invitation, acting not only as British Foreign Secretary, but as the Presidency of the European Union, and we have met today for a full morning of discussion because of our deep concern and because of our determination that Belgrade will understand that its conduct in Kosovo cannot be regarded as a purely internal matter. (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 106-107) "The grave violations of human rights, civil liberties, and freedom of political expression are matters of concern to every member of the international community and cannot be considered merely an internal matter. I am pleased to say that our statement, which will now be distributed to you, does not simply use harsh and strong language; it not only makes it clear that we condemn what has happened over the past week, but also strongly expresses our position for strong action." (Philip E. A, David P. A (ed), 2000, 106-110)

In this context, the CG issued a joint statement on 9 March 1998 in London, containing seven points:

1. The Ministers of the Contact Group, representatives of the European Commission and the Office of the High Representative, meeting in London on 9 March, discussed the dramatic developments in Kosovo with regard to the intolerable use of violence by the FRY there at a time when the Balkan region has gone through a period of violence and bloodshed in the recent past.
2. On this occasion, we remind Belgrade of our position from our meeting in New York on 27 September 1997, where we addressed our request to Belgrade and Pristina to move towards a peaceful dialogue, for which they also had our support. We are of course deeply disappointed by what we have seen in the following period. Instead of dialogue, we have seen an aggravation of repressive actions by the FRY authorities against Albanians in Kosovo. We are particularly concerned and shocked by the police violence against civilians during the peaceful demonstration on March 2 in Pristina (Statement by the Contact Group, https://1997-2001.state.gov/travels/980309_kosovo.html)
3. Our concerns about the situation and condemnation of the aforementioned actions cannot and should not be read in any way as support for terrorism. We condemn all actions that may have terrorist elements of the KLA or any other group or individual. All those political leaders in Kosovo must distance themselves from any terrorist actions. At the same time, we are committed to stopping any kind of supply of weapons or finances from outside the FRY to these groups. If such a thing exists, it must be stopped immediately. (Statement by the Contact Group, https://1997-2001.state.gov/travels/980309_kosovo.html)
4. We are particularly concerned by the police actions of the last ten days, which have created a dangerous and explosive situation in Kosovo. The use of violent means to suppress a non-violent action or demonstration is unacceptable. In this case, the Belgrade authorities should invite independent forensic experts who should ascertain the allegations that there were many extrajudicial killings. If this is proven, we demand and expect the relevant authorities of the FRY to identify and punish the orderers and perpetrators of these killings. (Statement by the Contact Group, https://1997-2001.state.gov/travels/980309_kosovo.html)
5. We remain fully committed to the protection of human rights values and therefore cannot fail to react and demand that the force used by public security authorities be measured and restrained in accordance with international laws

and conventions. Without any exception, official authorities are called upon to protect the human and civil rights of all residents without discrimination. (Statement by the Contact Group, https://1997-2001.state.gov/travels/980309_kosovo.html)

6. In light of the deplorable violence in Kosovo, we feel compelled to take steps to demonstrate to the authorities in Belgrade that they cannot challenge current international standards without facing serious consequences.

The Contact Group welcomes the continuation of consultations in the United Nations Security Council, given the implications of the situation in Kosovo for regional security. In this background, (Statement by the Contact Group, 1998, https://1997-2001.state.gov/travels/980309_kosovo.html) the Contact Group:

-Calls for the establishment of an international commission, to be appointed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in view of the above-mentioned situation in Kosovo. The FRY, with all its authorities, is obliged to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The member states of the Contact Group will make their assistance and facilitation available.

-The Contact Group supports the idea of establishing a new OSCE mission in Yugoslavia and its leaders for the establishment of a more specific mission under the leadership of Filipe Gonzales, which will have a primary focus on Kosovo. (Statement by the Contact Group, 1998, https://1997-2001.state.gov/travels/980309_kosovo.html)

- The Contact Group is committed to the return of long-term OSCE missions to Kosovo and invites foreign missions accredited in Belgrade to conduct frequent visits to Kosovo within the framework of the OSCE Mission in order to closely monitor the situation.

-The Contact Group pledges to continue its strong support for the Sant'Egidio Foundation in its efforts to ensure the preconditions for the implementation of the Education Agreement and to create resources and assist in its implementation.

-The CG is committed to reaching an international agreement in cooperation with civil society and non-governmental organizations that would help strengthen civil society in Kosovo but also distribute humanitarian aid.

-Seeing the developments in Kosovo, the CG countries are committed to preventing the expansion of the crisis to neighboring countries. The CG, seeing the regional security segment as very important, proposes calling a joint meeting with all governments in the region to prevent any support for violence and terrorism.

-The CG is committed to further strengthening the OSCE mission in Skopje, recommending the maintenance of an international army within the framework of UNPREDEP. In FYROM, but also directly, the CG will organize frequent visits to Pristina to monitor the situation there. (Milo P., 2019, 46)

7. In addition to the cessation of killings, the Contact Group also endorses the following measures to be implemented by the FRY and Kosovo:

- a) consideration by the UN Security Council of comprehensive arms embargo measures, including terrorism;
- b) Refusal to supply the FRY with equipment that could be used for repressive actions by the FRY security forces in Kosovo;
- c) The FRY and serbian senior officials responsible for conducting repressive operations in Kosovo will be refused visa equipment.
- d) A freeze on the provision of government-financed export credit for trade and investment, including government financing of privatizations, in Serbia.
- ç) The Contact Group suspects that the Russian Federation will support measures (c) and (d) to be put in place immediately. However, if there is no progress towards the steps requested by the Contact Group, then the Russian Federation will be ready to discuss all of the above measures.
- e) The CG calls on President Milosevic to move quickly towards implementation and to stop the violence and to find a solution to the problem through dialogue. (Gashi I, 2023, 87-88)

We call on President Milošević to take swift and effective steps to stop the violence and to commit to finding a political solution to the Kosovo issue through dialogue.

- Specifically, he should within 10 days withdraw special police units and cease security force actions affecting the civilian population.
- Allow access to Kosovo for the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations as well as for representatives of the Contact Group and other embassies.
- Publicly commit to initiating a dialogue process, along the lines of paragraph 10, with the leadership of the Kosovo Albanian community.
- Cooperate constructively with the Contact Group in implementing the actions specified in paragraph 6 above, which require action by the Government of the FRY. (Gashi I, 2023, 87-88)

If President Milosevic accepts these demands, we will also discuss lifting the measures we have taken so far. If he is not prepared to take these steps and violence continues in Kosovo, the Contact Group will decide on further

international measures, including the freezing of FRY funds held abroad by the FRY and the Serbian government. (Gashi I, 2023, 87-88)

On 25 March the Contact Group will meet again to assess the reaction of the FRY government. Klaus Kinkel, German Foreign Minister. Arriving the day before, Madeleine Albright met with Yevgeny Primakov, her Russian counterpart. Their discussion served to help her better understand Moscow's position and to note that their disagreements remained complete. Primakov, while indeed saying that a civil war would have devastating consequences, believed that it was the Kosovars, not the Serbs, who were disturbing the country. Reaffirming his support for Milosevic, he explained that, for Russia, Kosovo was an internal problem. There was nothing surprising here, but Madeleine Albright sensed that "Russia's stance was not so much out of solidarity with its Slavic brothers, but rather out of the possibility of an international action that could serve as an example for an external intervention in Russia, where Chechen separatists were fighting the Russian army." (Boyes R., Jagger S, 2018, 135)

This new meeting of the Contact Group did not meet the expectations of the Anglo-Americans. It did not reach any concrete decisions, due to Russian obstruction but also to the desire of France and Germany not to anger Russia too much. As for the Italians, they did not agree to new sanctions so as not to endanger their trade activities with Serbia, according to Madeleine Albright. Under these conditions, Milosevic could very easily appease the Europeans with empty promises and a few diplomatic gestures. The situation seemed deadlocked and the Serbs, strongly supported by Russia, took advantage of the disagreements among the Westerners to continue military operations against the KLA and the civilian populations. (Baudouin J, 2019, 107)

3. CONCLUSIONS

From January 1998 to March 1999, the community of powerful Western European states, the USA and the Russian Federation, in various capacities, mostly within the framework of the CG, but not only, have held a long series of international meetings in an attempt to reach a common consensus on finding a way to prevent the outbreak and then the cessation of the war in Kosovo, which was started by Serbian forces with attacks against the civilian population under the pretext of destroying the "terrorist" groups of the KLA, as Serbian and Russian propaganda called the liberation guerrilla units.

The fact that the commitment and engagement of the international community to find a peaceful solution through dialogue between the parties was intense and comprehensive is evidenced by the large number of meetings at the highest level during the period January 1998-March 1999. During this period, as much as we have aggravation of the situation and military operations on the ground, we have international diplomatic engagement to find a solution through dialogue. Proof of this is the fact that during this period the CG held a long and frequent series of its meetings, in almost all important European capitals and in the USA.

The stance of the international community in the initial phase managed to create some basic principles around which common positions and declarations were created, which were mainly formulated as: no changing the borders of the FRY, no status quo. The priority of a solution through dialogue and support for direct meetings between political leaders (President Milosevic and the Albanian political leader, Mr. Ibrahim Rugova)

After the attacks of the Serbian forces on civilians in Prekaz in early March 1998 and the crimes committed there, it began to be understood among the member states of the CG that it would be difficult to maintain the basic principles that had been established for the resolution of the conflict. The US representative called for increased pressure on Belgrade, hinting that there would be punishment if Milosevic continued on the course he had begun.

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