

Speech: Sustainable normalisation through dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia

Thank you Mr President. Thank you to the Under-Secretary-General for his briefing.

I've listened very carefully to what President Vučić and President Thaçi said today.

Mr President, we believe that the development of its own armed forces is within Kosovo's sovereignty as a self-governing independent state in close consultation with KFOR and we urge Kosovo to do this – and I hereby join the French representative – in close consultation with NATO and the wider international community. And I note from the Kosovo announcement that this development is to take place over the course of ten years.

Since Resolution 1244 was passed in 1999, Kosovo has become an independent, self-governing state recognized by over 100 members of the United Nations and its decision to extend the mandate of the Kosovo Security Force should be viewed in this context. The United Kingdom's interpretation of Resolution 1244 Mr President is that it does not – I repeat, not – contain anything that precludes the future transition of the mandate of the KSF. In fact Mr President, I re-read it at lunchtime. I then went on to read the document that followed it, the constitutional framework and the UN Ahtisaari Plan, the so-called "comprehensive settlement." I can assure the Council that nothing in any of those three documents precludes the transformation of the KSF. The constitutional framework set up a Kosovo Protection Force. The Constitution builds on that proposal and this recent decision builds on the Constitution so I just wanted to set that out Mr President.

That said, we continue to urge Kosovo to act responsibly, to act transparently and in consultation with NATO allies and to uphold Kosovo's existing commitments to arrangements with KFOR and what President Thaçi said about his assurances today in that respect are welcome, but of course Mr President, we look for them to be put into action.

I've noted the claim that the transition of the KSF is a threat to the Kosovo-Serb community. This claim is not borne out by Kosovo's genuine efforts to make the KSF a multi-ethnic force as NATO allies have requested and the United Kingdom regrets that these multi-ethnic efforts have been undermined by external pressure. We encouraged the Kosovo Government to continue its outreach to the Kosovo-Serb community to allay any anxieties. And it's a long time Mr President since the Council visited Kosovo, but I was on one of the earlier trips and we went into the Kosovo Serb community in the north where we heard from many people, but not all of them, supported the account given by President Vučić and the Russian Ambassador today.

We don't share Belgrade's perception that the expansion in size and mandate over the next decade risk jeopardizing regional stability either and we look to Belgrade to respond in a measured way, including in their public statements.

In this light Mr President, the United Kingdom considers assertions made by senior politicians and officials about the use of force by Serbia to be unhelpful and rejects the idea that such use of force might even be floated. I think it is irresponsible that they should have been repeated by one member of the Council today. I do agree with that member that there is a risk of a return to turmoil, but it is not Mr President caused by this decision. It is caused by those from outside Kosovo who would seek to exploit it for their own ends.

I do however take encouragement from listening to the Russian support today for NATO, which I think may be a first in this Chamber.

Mr President, as other speakers have noted, the reason that we are here, the fundamental reason these problems persist is because of the lack of normalisation. At every step, settlements, progress have been blocked. The UN has tried, the EU, the US and Russia have tried, and unfortunately Mr President, at every stage of trying to settle this issue, there has been a blockage and I am sorry to say that it has come from Belgrade. But the only way is normalisation and we look to both Kosovo and Serbia to make progress in that way.

We note with optimism the resolution passed by the Assembly of Kosovo on 15 December to establish a cross-party negotiating team and I join my French and other colleagues in urging both sides to return to negotiations through the EU-facilitated dialogue. Progress on the dialogue is vital for stability, security and prosperity in the two countries in the region. Final agreement itself needs also to contribute towards local, regional and global stability. And the two sides need to keep in mind that any proposals they put forward through the negotiations need to enhance the safety and security of all – I repeat, all – their citizens.

Mr President I don't find it surprising that there was an EU-8 statement today. Obviously, I took part in it but it's not surprising because it is our region. We have cared and still care very deeply about what happens in the western Balkans and EU countries and the EU itself have put a lot of effort into helping stability and security there. But it is their future. It is the future of Kosovo and Serbia. I urge them, as other speakers have done today, I urge them to make all the steps necessary to normalise their relations through the EU-facilitated dialogue and I call on all their leaders who have been elected to represent their people's interests. I call on all their leaders to enable this to happen. Both countries must now focus on a sustainable normalisation agreement through the dialogue which enhances security, enjoys popular domestic support and benefits both countries. And we stand ready Mr President, as we have always done, to support such an agreement. Thank you.