

ALO Interview with Mr. Petritsch, 5 February, 2021

1. 22 years have passed since the negotiations in Rambouillet (Saturday, February 6). When you look at it from this distance, were the negotiations doomed from the start or could they have succeeded?

The negotiations could have succeeded, and I believe that an agreement would have been positive for Belgrade. This was also understood by the Serbian negotiators, since Rambouillet was about the re-establishment of autonomy, and not the independence of Kosovo.

The failure of Rambouillet and the subsequent NATO intervention without UN backing meant that the last chance to keep Kosovo in Serbia was lost. It is now much more challenging and difficult for President Vucic than it was for President Milosevic to normalize relations with Kosovo.

2. Would you perhaps do something differently now?

While the negotiations were breaking down, I have tried to continue the negotiations directly with Milosevic in Belgrade and was strongly supported in this attempt by the Russian negotiator Boris Majorski. Unfortunately, Milosevic has curtly declined the Russian proposal to continue to talk.

At the time, the international community was still under the shock of the war in Bosnia and especially the terrible events at Srebrenica. They did not want any further dragging-out of negotiations while the armed conflict between the Serb forces and UCK continued. Even Moscow had resigned by that point. As we now know, the NATO intervention was finally stopped with the help of Russia.

3. Why did Milosevic decide not to sign the agreement?

Kosovo was viewed as a core territory for the Serbian national identity – thus the decision was more by emotions than rational considerations.

From my point of view, this was a strategic mistake by Belgrade: if Rambouillet had succeeded, the international community would have had to take on the responsibility for ensuring that an autonomous Kosovo remains a part of then Yugoslavia.

4. How did the Pristina side behave?

It was the KLA that largely drove the negotiations. In the end, the Pristina side was able to endorse the agreement, even though it was far from perfect in their view as it ruled out independence, because they already assumed Milosevic would not agree to it.

5. What would the situation on the ground look like now if Rambouillet succeeded?

It is generally difficult to answer such historic counterfactuals, but the question remains what Belgrade could have offered the Albanian population of Kosovo – one of the poorest regions in Europe - for them to remain in Serbia.

I am afraid the conflict would have carried on in all levels and thus held back the economic development of Serbia and called into question the EU accession process of the country.

For me, the EU-mediated Dialogue seems to be the most promising avenue to the settlement of the conflict and a lasting and stable normalization.