

*Serbia will never recognize this unilateral declaration of independence;* □

*We seek peaceful compromise.*

*by Vuk Jeremić*

On Feb. 17, 2008, the ethnic-Albanian authorities of Serbia's breakaway province of Kosovo unilaterally declared independence against the will of the U.N Security Council and in contravention of my country's constitution. We made it immediately clear that we would never recognize the unilateral declaration of independence, implicitly or explicitly. This position will not change. Serbia will continue to use all diplomatic resources at the disposal of a sovereign state to oppose Pristina's attempt at partitioning our country. No democratic and proud nation - whose territorial integrity is under threat - would act differently.

From the onset of this grave crisis, we responded to the unilateral declaration of independence peacefully. In October 2008, the General Assembly of the United Nations overwhelmingly approved a resolution seeking the legal opinion of the International Court of Justice on the lawfulness of the unilateral declaration of independence.

After many months of deliberation, the court delivered its findings. It neither endorsed the view that this unilateral declaration of independence was a unique case, nor Pristina's claim that Kosovo is a state. Moreover, the court failed to approve the province's avowed right of secession from Serbia, or any purported right to self-determination for Kosovo's Albanians.

Instead, the court chose to narrowly examine the language of the unilateral declaration of independence. This strictly technical approach made it possible to say that the text of the declaration itself did not violate international law. The Kosovo Albanian authorities are deliberately misinterpreting the court's views as a legalization of their attempt at secession.

This may produce extensive and deeply problematic consequences for the international community. Ethnic minorities across the globe could take advantage of the opportunity to write their own declarations of independence according to the Kosovo textual template. This would put them in a position to plausibly claim that such texts sufficiently legitimize their respective acts of secession, and for their proclaimed independence to be in conformity with international law.

The inherent dangers of such a scenario must be prevented. Otherwise, the borders of every multi-ethnic state would be permanently threatened by secessionism, producing lasting instability throughout the world.

The court has left it up to the U.N. General Assembly to manage the political repercussions of the advisory opinion. This has been confirmed by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who stated that the General Assembly "will determine how to proceed on this matter." The forthcoming debate will therefore focus on the consequences and implications of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in light of the court's findings.

We must ensure that the outcome of this debate makes a positive contribution to global governance. We must find a realistic approach to close the Pandora's box opened up by Pristina. The only way forward is to commence peaceful dialogue between the parties that produces a compromise, a mutually acceptable solution to all outstanding issues.

The consequence of a failure to agree on Kosovo would be the establishment of a universally applicable precedent that provides a ready-made model for unilateral secession.

Serbia is committed to working with the international community to prevent such a disastrous scenario. What we seek is an equitable outcome that both sides can embrace. This is the only way to reinforce shared priorities, to normalize relations, and to complete the democratic transformation of the Balkans into a stable, prosperous region fully integrated into the European Union.

Mr. Jeremic is the foreign minister of the Republic of Serbia.