



European Union Special Representative in Kosovo

Presentation made by EUSR Pieter Feith to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament

February 11, 2009

Addressing the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, EUSR Pieter Feith said:

“Members of the Committee, Ladies and Gentleman, I am pleased to be here with you today and to provide an assessment of the progress that has been made in the consolidation and coordination of the EU presences on the ground in Kosovo, as well as the initiatives I have undertaken as part of my mandated responsibilities.

“Our meeting is also timely, not only because of the mentioned anniversaries, but because it follows the adoption by the European Parliament on 5 February of a resolution on Kosovo and the role of the EU. I have read this resolution as expressing the Parliament’s full support to the EU’s mission in Kosovo in their efforts to work with the authorities in Pristina on Kosovo’s European perspective as part of the region while reminding the Pristina authorities of their commitments in particular with regard to strengthening the rule of law and continuing respect for community rights. I particularly welcome the backing that this resolution gives me on core issues, namely, decentralization, the protection of religious and cultural heritage, reform of the economy and security sector reform. I will return to these in more detail later in this presentation. Your support on these critical areas of work gives me impetus to strive even harder to ensure rapid progress during this year and beyond.

“I noted in paragraph 32 of the resolution the Parliament’s concern about the slow pace of reforms undertaken by the Kosovo authorities. Indeed, the government must undertake genuine steps in the areas of accountability and transparency as well as in the fight against corruption and organized crime. It must also strengthen links between civic and political life and ensure the use of public and international donor funds in a responsible and transparent manner. These are all essential elements of an environment that would consolidate further Kosovo’s European aspirations and help improve social and economic conditions in the citizens’ daily lives.

“In the past year, Kosovo has adopted a Constitution, passed important legislation, strengthened core government ministries, advanced the establishment of a Constitutional Court as well as other public security institutions and proved to be a cooperative partner of the international community. All of these developments have taken place against the backdrop of a relatively stable security environment. In December of last year, EULEX launched its mission throughout Kosovo thereby heralding a significant leap forward for the European Union’s engagement as the leading partner of the Kosovo government.

“The momentum thus generated has helped enable important strides in what I have defined as the three core areas for our work this year and in the future—stability, reform and reconciliation. I will address these strategic objectives in turn and then conclude by suggesting the best ways forward to achieve them in partnership with the Kosovo authorities.

“The sustainability of all initiatives fundamentally depends on the continued political stability of Kosovo. As I have already stated, while the situation in Kosovo has remained stable in the past year, the political

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reactions in Pristina to the UN-led discussions on the six points as well as recent events in Mitrovica highlight the continued fragility of the situation on the ground.

“As the EUSR, I have established a local mechanism for transparent consultation on issues of practical importance, including topics mentioned in the UN Secretary-General’s November 2008 report. These include, but are not limited to, customs collection and revenue distribution, the operation of the courthouse in Mitrovica, the question of applicable law and the operations of trains in the North.

“It is my strong belief that by keeping discussions at the technical level, promoting European standards and best practices as well as closely involving Brussels and the relevant local and international stakeholders, results can be achieved in at least some of these areas. This is part of the close coordination and cooperation with the EULEX Head of Mission, M. de Kermabon, as you encouraged me to pursue in your resolution.

“Since a European future unites Belgrade and Pristina and the EU, and the EU has assumed the leadership role, the EU might be best placed to provide the channel for communication between Belgrade and Pristina. If the intention is to achieve positive results, then we have the instruments in place to help bring about such an outcome. The overall objective however remains direct good neighbourly contacts between the two sides.

“Engaging in this manner will also facilitate EULEX reaching full operational capability throughout Kosovo as soon as possible. This requirement, along with the issue of strengthening the rule of law have been regularly discussed by the Prime Minister and opposition figures in their public appearances, and in private meetings with myself. The urgency of moving forward expeditiously, especially in the North, has been highlighted by the violent events over the Christmas holidays and by yesterday’s peaceful demonstrations in Mitrovica.

“In this context, critical questions related to parallel structures and arrests of high profile criminals need to be addressed. The answers will impact on the European Union’s credibility and its willingness to take on the difficult and perhaps dangerous tasks to integrate the North and to normalize the situation there as part of a single legal space and customs area based on European best practice. Citizens in Kosovo are expecting an enormous amount from the European Union. We cannot afford to fail in our responsibilities.

“On the political level, and this is where the Member States of the European Union have a crucial role to play, intensified and better support from Belgrade to the EU missions work on the ground is crucial, in particular with regard to a more cooperative attitude of mayors in the north and isolating hard line criminals in the north.

“In this regard, I believe that the decision of Kosovo’s President not to hold general elections this year will help maintain the stability of the political situation in Kosovo. Regarding municipal elections, likely to be held later this year, so far no final decision has been taken as to when they will take place. Progress in decentralization and ensuring Serb participation will be important elements when deciding on exact timing. Another prerequisite is a functioning Central Electoral Commission. Consultations among relevant stakeholders are continuing. The Government is eager to carry out a Kosovo-wide population census as soon as possible. I will consult with the authorities on timing. A recent pilot census achieved

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71 per cent participation from Kosovo Serbs. We want to ensure even greater minority participation in a nationwide census.

“The Assembly of Kosovo has played a central role in Kosovo’s institutional development since its inception. In addition to endorsing the founding documents and ratifying its constitution, it has also been a key player in the Kosovo institutions’ efforts to implement over 50 laws with particular emphasis on minority rights. However, I do believe that the Assembly is still falling short of fulfilling its key role in a democracy, that of providing the main forum for political debate and parliamentary oversight and scrutiny. Many decisions are still taken by the Government without significant involvement of the Assembly. And much of the political intercourse is still channeled through the press and potentially in the streets. Since it remains a young and still developing institution, the Assembly requires our full and consistent support.

“While the decision not to hold elections was the President’s, I am on safe ground when I say that avoiding general elections this year eliminates a huge distraction, and helps to focus the minds of the government and legislature on the extensive reforms necessary to put Kosovo on a sound and stable footing which is vital for further progress.

“For a start, ladies and gentlemen, the government has pledged the privatization of state-owned companies, but has yet to formulate a strategy. Embryonic plans have been announced for the main electricity producer and provider KEK, for post and telecommunications, as well as for the airport. These must advance more robustly. However, the current global recession may have a downward effect on FDI in Kosovo. More broadly, Kosovo authorities will have to manage the publicly owned enterprises transparently and undertake the necessary appointments to their boards based on qualifications and competence rather than on political and party preferences.

“In the area of security sector reform, the deactivation of Kosovo Protection Corps was achieved on January 20, and the Kosovo Security Force activated the day thereafter. This process, as highlighted in your resolution, allows a small but qualified security force with civilian protection tasks to stand up under democratic control. However, the selection of KSF members is likely to cause further dissatisfaction from former members of the KPC, leading to possible tensions.

“Mr Chairman, I now come to the third priority—the need for a continued commitment to the reconciliation process among Kosovo’s different communities. As you asked me to do in your resolution, I encourage and support Kosovo’s leadership to step up their efforts at outreach to the Kosovo Serbs and other non-majority communities. Indeed there might be an opportunity now that more and more Kosovo Serbs are willing to come forward and engage with the central institutions. A recently held roundtable successfully launched a dialogue on concrete issues such as health and education. The PM and key ministers participated and will remain engaged. Kosovo Serb leaders, including from the North, expressed their readiness to support this initiative led by EUSR.

“In the particularly important area of religious and cultural heritage, some progress has already been achieved. We have been working very closely with the Ministry of Culture as well as the European Commission Liaison Office to establish a forum for Technical Information Exchange in this area. Indeed, in line with the European Partnership we seek to further strengthen the mechanisms serving to protect the rich religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo. The first meeting of the forum held a couple of weeks ago brought together a wide range of actors in the field of cultural heritage, including UNMIK and the

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Council of Europe, allowing the EUSR to guide the political agenda. Following this inaugural meeting, the process is set to continue, but would further benefit from participation, or at least some form of support of the Serb authorities and the Serb Orthodox Church.

“The authorities also continue to make good progress in preparing for decentralization. A few days ago, the PM announced that the competencies for social welfare will be transferred to the municipal level, and we are working on establishing preparation teams for the creation of five new municipalities by the end of March. Work on education reform and developing the Serbian school curricula has also been set in motion.

“Mr Chairman, the concerns that you have raised in your resolution with respect to returns of minorities and displaced persons are also mine and we are consistently addressing these with the authorities. The Ministry of Communities and Returns will in cooperation with UNDP and the European Commission support the individual returns process. The Ministry has allocated further resources for community development, education, housing and for returning communities. Although the allocated resources are modest, the government is fully committed to work hard in this area. Several challenges remain in creating the right environment for higher levels of returns and a comfortable reintegration of minority communities into daily life in Kosovo. We will continue to endeavour to address these issues in close cooperation with the authorities.

“On the specific issue of the condition of the Roma community affected by lead poisoning in the North, I am in strong favour of a robust government led political process aimed at rapid closure of the camps and sustainable relocation of the Roma in safe areas with sound sanitation facilities. Currently, this process is seriously hindered by the lack of communication between the relevant actors in the North and South, and the politically precarious state of affairs in the North. Currently the European Commission Liaison Office in Pristina is coordinating national and international stakeholders in determining long term sustainable solutions.

“To conclude, an ambitious and broad agenda lies ahead for Kosovo and the international community, especially for the European Union, in the year ahead. But I believe that with sufficient political will, coordination and encouragement, the Kosovo government will be able to progress in its European aspirations. From what I have said there is ample evidence that my dual responsibilities in Kosovo have grown in a mutually reinforcing manner thereby enabling me to speak to various sides with appropriate authority and with a greater likelihood of reaching the objectives that I have set out to achieve.

“I would like to once again thank you for your support and for a strong resolution that has added even greater enthusiasm and momentum for my team and myself in our efforts to assist the Kosovo people in the best possible manner.

“Thank you very much.”

Ends

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