

**STATEMENT BY ZAHIR TANIN, SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
SECRETARY-GENERAL AND HEAD OF UNMIK**

SECURITY COUNCIL DEBATE ON UNMIK

NEW YORK, 13 APRIL 2021

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

I am pleased to be with you today, and to brief you on essential developments during the past six months.

Against the systemic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, early legislative elections were prepared, and successfully conducted, across Kosovo on the 14th of February. Prior to the election, during less than one year and a half, three separate governments held power in Kosovo. This fact alone helps to illustrate the amount of political turbulence which prevailed, and which made the results of February's vote all the more significant for the population.

Turnout was high, including a nearly three-fold increase in voting among the diaspora. The winning party, Vetëvendosje, received more than half of all votes

cast. An examination of the demographics of the vote revealed a strong desire for change across Kosovo society. The expectations expressed were for a shift in the responsiveness of a government to the real hopes and needs of its voters, for greater equality of opportunity, accountability, and the rule of law.

Accordingly, expectations across Kosovo will remain as high as were the results. Throughout the past months -- despite the limitations caused by the pandemic -- I and my team have been engaged with many leaders in Pristina, as well as in Belgrade. Yesterday, I met Kosovo's new Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, who shared with me the major priorities of his government, and who assured me of his understanding of the strategic importance of advancing the dialogue with Belgrade. I spoke just this morning with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who highlighted to me the importance of the dialogue for peace and stability, and reiterated his hope that this dialogue should be intensified, in order to produce results beyond those previously accomplished.

Mr. President,

Emerging dynamics, including the requirement to elect a new President, contributed to the necessity of the general election, as the former President had resigned after his indictment by the Kosovo Specialist Prosecutor and forthcoming

trial at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers. Last week, Vjosa Osmani was elected President of Kosovo, becoming the second woman to hold this high office. Indeed, leadership by women continued to grow overall by this election, with 43 women, or 36 per cent, elected to the 120-seat Kosovo legislature. Kosovo's legislature thus joins others in the Balkans region by ranking at the high end of female elected representation. Women also now hold two of three Deputy Prime Minister positions, and lead five of 15 ministerial portfolios.

I know, from my discussions in both Pristina and Belgrade, that each side is aware how central the quality of their relations will be in achieving the aspirations of their constituencies, for progress along the European path. Only a meaningful and sincere dialogue, and forward-looking policies, will evolve these relations, and allow mutual interests to be met. Under the stewardship of the European Union, ample technical and political support stands ready for continuation of the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue, aiming towards a comprehensive agreement. As many European and other international officials have done, I urge leaders to be mindful of the impact of their public statements. Gains to public trust in this process are as fragile as they are essential. With a strongly mandated government now settled in Pristina, we should expect to see difficult subjects treated with seriousness and diligence

As always, UNMIK supports the process unequivocally, while, at ground level, we will continue to work, by all means available to us, to promote a conducive environment for progress.

Mr. President,

As in other places throughout the world, Kosovo remains under relentless pressure from the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This latest reporting period witnessed two dramatic spikes in infections, one in November, and another which just began in March and is continuing. Although additional containment measures were reintroduced, beginning just last week, the running average of new infections is reaching its highest point since the pandemic began. As of today, the virus is known already to have infected more than 100,000 people in Kosovo, and has caused over 2,000 deaths, one of the highest per capita. As part of the COVAX scheme, a first delivery of 24,000 doses arrived in Kosovo at the end of March, marking only the beginning of a vaccination programme. It will be essential to accelerate vaccine-related support to Kosovo, given the alarming infection rates and the spread of more virulent strains of the pathogen.

Mr. President,

Our Mission adjusted early to be able to continue operations, including by providing staff and families with around the clock, fully-equipped medical support and testing. We will shortly be vaccinating all UN staff and dependents, thanks to strong support from the Secretariat. In line with these efforts, we have been in a position also to assist the authorities and especially vulnerable populations, including by the distribution of essential items. My communications staff helped to design UN-backed information campaigns, providing health-related information and news in non-majority languages, while the entire UN family in Kosovo has worked to channel assistance to health providers and institutions.

Mr. President,

In accordance with our mandate, the Mission continues to engage on the ground, across multiple sectors and areas of work, anchored by the agenda set forth during the UN Trust Building Forum held in 2018. These include programmes and projects to empower women and youth in politics and society, to promote innovation and

catalyse civic activism, and to expand multi-lingual education, to mention only a few. Through our Youth, Peace and Security programme, we have continued to promote youth advocacy and cooperation, including sessions with officials of 19 ethnically-mixed municipalities, and online campaigns by change-makers sharing experiences of the pandemic. We engage regularly with Kosovo authorities and civil society organizations on the monitoring, protection and promotion of human rights, as well as to promote accountability and effectiveness in the justice system. We carry on forging legal aid mechanisms for vulnerable communities, such as the UNMIK-supported Legal Aid Centre of the Kosovo Law Institute, which most recently opened a new branch in Mitrovica.

With the special importance and sensitivity attached to religious freedom and tolerance, we closely monitor all incidents affecting places of worship, and work together with communities and authorities to ensure their safety. This is part of a shared responsibility for promoting inter-ethnic trust and reducing the risk of tensions.

In the COVID-19 context, we have developed systematic monitoring of the human rights ramifications of the pandemic, as well as of the policies adopted to combat it. We urge the government to make progress clarifying the fate of missing persons

through specific and active engagement with the Pristina-Belgrade Working Group on Missing Persons. We promote access to legal and medical services, alongside training and opportunities, for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence.

In each of these engagements, we rely upon an efficient network of complementarity and cooperation with international partners, among and beyond the UN family.

Mr. President,

Kosovo's new government faces great opportunities, alongside great challenges. Prime Minister Kurti leads a strong majority government. He has foreshadowed a 'people-centered' approach to governance, stressing the advancement of justice, addressing endemic corruption, and improving the social and economic outlook of all. No less, this equates to an important opportunity to transform public narratives which have held hostage the aspirations of a new generation. Opening the door to the future requires a transformation, and changing the priorities which are

reflected in both words and in deeds. Reducing tension also requires that ruling and opposition parties alike prove their capacity to cohere on wider interests.

The dialogue with Belgrade is not a formula imposed from without. It is a building block of progress that must come from within. As the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, I have felt firsthand the public's frustration with the pace of change, compared against the potential that exists for a future less burdened by nationalist sloganeering and ethnicity-based scapegoating. There is an opportunity at hand, and UNMIK remains committed to supporting the steadfast leadership needed to seize it. The voters in Kosovo raised their voices for breaking with the past, and I hope that the members of this Council will add their clear support for the realisation of a more peaceful, more prosperous future in Kosovo and the region.

I thank the members of the Council most sincerely for their attention, and for their continuing support of the work of UNMIK.

Thank you.