

**STATEMENT BY CAROLINE ZIADEH,
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SECURITY COUNCIL DEBATE ON UNMIK**

**New York
27 APRIL 2023**

Mr. President, Excellencies,

I am honoured to update the Council on developments in Kosovo, which, in the most recent reporting period, have included serious challenges as well as an important collective effort to bring Belgrade-Pristina relations nearer to stability and normalisation.

Efforts from both sides will be needed in order to realise the potential for a positive change in relations, particularly given the preceding cycles of tension, provocations and grievances that occurred during much of 2022, and unfortunately have continued, in some aspects, even during the most recent days. Regular breakdowns of effective, timely and preventive action are well documented in the Secretary-General's report. Without increased commitment to the mechanism of renewed negotiations, failures of confidence could worsen within Kosovo, with direct consequences for regional stability. Therefore, a sustained focus of attention on the principles and declarations jointly affirmed on 27 February in Brussels, and further elaborated on 18 March in Ohrid, should be matched by courageous leadership action, from the parties and from the stewards and supporters of the negotiations.

Specific commitments have been made by both sides to the new “*Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia*”. Alongside these, there are immediate steps that can be taken to demonstrate good will on the ground. Achieving actual progress demands that confidence be rebuilt among those who have grown suspicious of the intentions of each side.

Leaders should take responsible steps to reduce the likelihood of further stand-offs on issues which have degraded public confidence over recent months. These include matters which precipitated the withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions *en masse* in November, and those which continue to polarize public opinion during the local elections conducted last Sunday. Steps should be taken to demonstrate that police and judicial bodies are fully insulated from political agendas and political interference. Clear and continuous communication to the public will be needed concerning issues that affect their livelihoods and human rights – issues such as expropriations of property, and the ability to count upon impartial institutions of justice. Reassurance is necessary in order to replace the feelings of mistrust and uncertainty felt by ordinary inhabitants, on both sides of the Ibar river. Accusatory rhetoric should be avoided, and fears replaced with concrete reasons for confidence and optimism.

Mr. President,

The 23 April extraordinary elections were peaceful. At the same time, questions of representation must be addressed, as part of the broader political process that is now ongoing. Elected leaders, police forces and all civic services at municipal level should genuinely reflect and fulfill the interests of their local constituents.

On 2 May, the expected endorsement by both parties of the joint Declaration on Missing Persons, facilitated by the EU, has the potential to resume the full cooperation between Pristina and Belgrade on Missing Persons within the existing Working Group, chaired by the ICRC. This would provide families on both sides the chance for answers regarding their loved ones. Likewise, the presentation by the Management Team of a Draft Statute for the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities should lead to its immediate, detailed and good faith consideration. The charting of a full implementation path is the minimum baseline owed to the public by leaders during their next high-level meeting. The Joint Monitoring Committee, indispensably, will need to prove efficient in its operation, and robust in its oversight of actions taken by both sides.

Mr. President,

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this session of the Council takes place against the backdrop of significant anniversaries, which offer an important perspective on recent developments. Among these are the 20th anniversary of the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit in which the EU pronounced its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. As has also been widely noted, this month marks the 10th anniversary of signature in Brussels of the “First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations”.

During the intervening years, as outlined in numerous reports to this Council, inconsistencies of commitment and action -- local as well as international – have regularly limited progress in advancing normalisation of relations. In the latter half of 2022, actions and reactions brought Pristina and Belgrade further away from the course previously agreed to in the framework of

the EU-facilitated dialogue, and even worryingly close to the edge of physical confrontation. These are the trends that responsible leaders must now work to change.

Through my interactions with a wide array of interlocutors -- including municipal, religious, civic society and business organisations -- the most common sentiments I encounter are frustration and concern about an uncertain future. However, equally, I see the spirit and the will to work to create a better reality. This is something we cherish as we work alongside all people striving for positive and tangible changes.

Mr. President,

Neighbours across the region, those already European Union members and those aspiring to join it, are watching as well. Commerce and investment simply will by-pass those areas in which normalised relations are unattained, or where tensions threaten basic institutional stability. Leaders from the region have expressed their support for the process now being undertaken by both sides to advance on the path to normalisation. Many have faced and overcome their own past challenges, toward achieving stability, reconciliation, and progress. They have done so by addressing difficult issues with creativity and a sense of longer-term political responsibility.

In the region, opportunities for reducing barriers to economic development and cooperation are being pursued through the promotion of important initiatives, which can and should be expedited, including by progress toward normalisation.

Mr. President,

In support of this process, UNMIK will continue to dedicate all efforts to help both leaders and their constituencies reap the benefits of improved communication and understanding of common problems -- and implementing solutions. This brings me to another anniversary. This year also marks five years of work under the rubric of UNMIK's trust-building agenda. This programme of activity sustains support for those on the ground working sincerely to promote inter-community trust, resilience, and confidence. It is an investment, over the longer term, in those who can positively reshape relations at all levels.

Our focus is on the empowerment of communities to flourish in spaces where ethnically divisive prejudice and political rhetoric are being transcended. Trust-building can directly help light the path to political normalisation. Political agreements need such soil in which to grow. Together, these approaches mark a genuine path toward a more sustainable, peaceful, and ultimately prosperous future.

I will highlight only a few ways in which the Mission is empowering trust-building champions to overcome the divisions wrought by miscommunication and frequent political invective. These include supporting language rights and language learning, where an UNMIK-sponsored online platform to learn Albanian and Serbian reaches more than 70,000 users. We are assisting families of missing persons via the Missing Persons Resource Center. We are promoting – and will continue to promote – the empowerment of youth and women leaders by providing substantial platforms for their engagement in all levels of decision-making. We are helping to ensure equal access to justice through improved courtroom infrastructure, free legal aid, and legal interpretation services.

Next month, we will inaugurate a community dialogue centre designed and led by local trust-building champions. We continue to strengthen cohesive, cross-

cutting work with UN agencies, and with all our international partners. Together, we are steadily growing the constituency for political compromise – despite all the challenges -- while demonstrating the positive effects this path offers in the real lives of people.

Mr. President,

It should be the aspiration of all of us that the accumulation of international efforts, will now chart a realistic path toward normalisation. The obstacles to this process may take the form of posturing, or insufficient political will to open the space for public acceptance. Implementation will surely face many pitfalls and require patience. None of these pitfalls, however, can match the gains to be achieved for the people through perseverance and delivery.

UNMIK will remain committed to supporting at all levels the progress made, which is among the most important parts of our mandate. We will do so in the expectation that the choices made by political leaders, the fulfilment of their obligations and their commitments, will lead to greater opportunities for a generation deserving better.

To play our role, the Mission continues to rely upon the support of this Council, as we work together with our partners, within and beyond the full spectrum of the United Nations system.

I thank you for this support, and for promoting solutions that serve the interests of a new generation in Kosovo and the region.

Thank you.