

[REDACTED]

forces in the summer of 1999. It was Slobodan Milosevic, said this Serbian Orthodox divine, who had "not only lost Kosovo but completely destroyed his own people, physically and spiritually".

The second thing I assert with confidence is that this will be the least worst outcome, not just for Kosovo but also for Serbia itself. Serbia has not exercised any effective sovereignty over Kosovo since the summer of 1999, with the exception of the Serb-controlled parts north of the river Ibar. In their hearts, most Serbs know that Kosovo is lost; but almost no one in Serbian politics will acknowledge that publicly. So Kosovo is a festering wound on the Serbian body politic, preventing the country's politicians, officials and journalists from concentrating on the things that really matter for the welfare of their people. Yes, this is an amputation - but sometimes, even with 21st century medical technology, it's better for the patient to have a mangled and gangrenous limb removed.

The real question now is not whether this is the right outcome but how it will be achieved. The best way forward has been blocked by the intransigence of Putin's Russia. That way - for which the UN special envoy for Kosovo, the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, and other negotiators worked so hard - would have been to get a UN security council resolution to bless the so-called Ahtisaari plan. This charts a course of supervised independence for Kosovo, with far-reaching protection and autonomy for Serbian holy places, communities and municipalities. Russia is doing no service at all to its fellow Orthodox Slavs in Serbia, or to itself, by being so bloody-minded; but bloody-minded it has been and bloody-minded it seems likely to remain following the recent Russian elections.

The worst way forward would be for the new Kosovan government, under the former Kosovo Liberation Army leader Hashim Thaci, to rush to a hasty unilateral declaration of independence - UDI. This could prompt a furious reaction from Serbian extremists and the Serbs north of the river Ibar; an angry response from the authorities in Belgrade (especially in the run-up to a presidential election), perhaps including an energy and trade blockade; not to mention possible tit-for-tat rhetoric coming out of the so-called Serb Republic in Bosnia.

The best way forward that is currently feasible, in the absence of Russian consent, is what senior negotiators are calling CDI, a coordinated declaration of independence. The new Kosovan government would move towards its cherished goal over the next three months, but in close coordination with the European Union and other international partners. Both the timing and the form would be agreed. The Albanian Kosovans would explicitly link their historic proclamation to acceptance of the Ahtisaari plan, including a new international office to supervise the running of the proto-state, a continued Nato security presence, and pledges to adopt a liberal constitution and protect minority rights. If he has sufficient courage and wisdom, Thaci will make his multi-ethnic commitment dramatically

[REDACTED]