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this process*

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THE U.S. DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IN THE KOSOVO-SERBIA DIALOGUE: A TESTIMONY OF EU'S INCONCLUSIVE ROLE IN THIS PROCESS

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Since its start in 2011, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue had failed to create a sense of continuity, distinguishable pattern and foreseeable finish line. Sporadic long breaks, evidential challenges in implementing mutual agreements, and repositioning of main domestic and international key actors top the reasons why. The one constant, however, had been the central role of the European Union (EU).

United States' recent interest and contribution in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue suggests that EU's role is subject to changes too.

With no prior public knowledge that such talks are even underway, and despite the fact that the EU facilitated dialogue has been effectively on hold since November 2018, in January 2020, in a breaking news fashion, U.S. Ambassador to Germany and U.S. President's special envoy for Kosovo and Serbia, Richard Grenell, made a critical announcement.

The U.S. have brokered two deals between Kosovo and Serbia that entail restoring, for the first time since 1999, direct flights between respective capital cities as well as railway services. In his statement, Ambassador Grenell was firm that he and President Trump's administration have no interest in dwelling into the political arguments. Instead, they are solely interested to push forward an economic-based approach that will target the rather poor state of economic development and wellbeing of the people on both sides of the border.

In that context, restoring direct flight connection and railway services is arguably a step in the right direction. However, given the fact that very little content information is disclosed about the deals, and taking into account the fair share of unpromising experiences when it comes to implementing agreements between Kosovo and Serbia, everyone should *hold their horses* for a minute before making any premature assessments of the actual economic and political impact of the deals.

Regardless, there are two striking elements too obvious to miss.

First, the U.S. has quickly marked its presence in the Kosovo and Serbia dialogue and is slowly stamping its authority once again in the region. Such achievement has its basis on a very simple logic; first tackle simple issues, and then build on it. This logic is a fundamental principle of negotiating. It initially enables the broker to establish a fair and accepting authority for all parties involved, and then it sets the ground for a valuable momentum for the rest of the process.

The EU used to employ the same logic at first. However, in the recent years the EU went completely adrift. It initially failed to uphold its promise for visa liberalization for Kosovo citizens, showed biased stances when engaged in controversial discussion of possible border revision between Kosovo and Serbia, and at no point in time did it manage to produce a momentum for a final agreement.

Second, the EU is seemingly sidelined, and was reportedly unaware of such talks even though the deals were taking place in Berlin, Germany. Certainly, this must have left many EU high-end official scratching their heads, considering the fact that EU has a solid legacy in facilitating freedom of movement between Kosovo and Serbia, and is directly involved in the restoration of the Kosovo's railway infrastructure.

Effectively, the U.S. brokered deals would have not been possible without the EU facilitated agreements on Freedom of Movement and Integrated Border Management.

Meanwhile, it is the EU together with European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and European Investment Bank that are lined up to finance a 200 million euros project for the revitalization of 'railway corridor 10' which connect Kosovo with Serbia in the first place. Without the revitalization of 'corridor 10', restoring railway services is practically impossible.

This is a worrisome development, as it marks the first time since 1999 that U.S. and the EU show no coordination and engage in parallel agendas with regard to Kosovo-Serbia matters.

As assumed in our previous expresso insight, these recent developments are strong and clear evidence that the U.S. currently is a formal party in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue framework, and that the dialogue is no longer perceived a regional responsibility of the EU but an immediate cause for broader international engagement.

After almost a decade, the EU no longer bears the exclusive responsibility to mediate agreements between Kosovo and Serbia, and in effect, the U.S. direct interference in the region is a testimony of the EU's inconclusive role and a huge blow for its state of foreign affairs in relation to the Western Balkans.

The U.S. brokered deals attest to the demise of the role of the EU, at its own indiscretion, in this crucial regional process. However, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, late visit to Kosovo and Serbia is a strong suggestion that the EU continues to have a strong interest in this process and refuses to be sidelined. The EU's truthful commitment and clear policy are critical for the restoration of its current idle role in the process.

Meanwhile, as the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has become ever so unpredictable, this is the last call for the Kosovo leading parties and politicians to engage in serious and honest talks that will for once enable Kosovo to have a proactive approach towards this critical process.

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