

Manifesto for Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia

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May, 2019



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Policy Note 03/2019

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May 2019

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MANIFESTO FOR DIALOGUE BETWEEN KOSOVO AND SERBIA

European Union, its member states, and most importantly, the US, should insist in a final agreement that will not antagonize their beliefs about and obliterate their share in what is the most successful story of state-building in a post-conflict context.

Relations between Kosovo and Serbia may rarely be explained outside the realm of furor and anger. Causes remain deeply embedded in histories of both nations (Albanians and Serbs) and their competing narratives. The centre of the narrative is the Schism- a divide which questions what Kosovo epitomizes – that habitually applies as an excuse, a cause, and equally, as a relief for Serbs and Albanians alike. Eleven (11) years after Kosovo's independence understanding the Schism became more complex. At present it symbolizes a “blend” of reasons, emotions, histories and dramas of power politics.

For many the Schism might very well be the reason why the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia remains mute. Excuses not to continue the dialogue are wide-ranging as the impetus to restart it is negligible. Yet, in this era of uncertainty, there is one definite principle that both the leadership in Serbia and Kosovo acknowledge. Their European perspective is interlinked; through the dialogue they have the chance to do something about it, and this opportunity has not yet been wasted, regardless of the Schism.

Sadly, most of the events in the current and recent past have evidenced that the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia – initially viewed as an opportunity – remains, at present, the object of the vehement debate. There are two main (valid?) reasons prompting it. The first is the degree of ambiguity around the dialogue process, and, the second are the missing contours and the deformation of the

purpose of the final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.

Facilitated by the EU, the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia started in 2011 and aimed to achieve two simultaneous goals: a) normalize relations between both countries and, b) assist the gradual rapprochement of the latter with EU. Since then, the EU enabled the signing of thirty-three agreements, ranging from recognition of custom stamps to the removal of parallel (supported by the Serb Government) institutions acting within the four northern municipalities of Kosovo.

However, these short-term successes were achieved thanks to a caveat. Throughout this initial dialogue process, the EU, cautious of the divergent hopes of the parties in the dialogue, applied the ambiguity as a tool to keep the dialogue process rolling. Notwithstanding its consequences, and as the dialogue continued, the ambiguity became the ‘abracadabra’ to persuade parties to sign, one after the other, all of the thirty-three agreements. It obviously made Kosovo and Serbia believe that both are winners. While for Serbia ambiguity was the recipe to maintain Kosovo entrenched in daily politics, and uninterruptedly pursue its EU integration path as well as enjoy the leverage to improve its image in Europe, for Kosovo it was the ploy to lure its claim to statehood into the dialogue and make it depend on its outcome.

Here again, at present, the ambiguity and the diverging expectations of the parties in the dialogue have become the mantras which divide the West and Serbia alike. The West insists that Kosovo is independent, and any agreement should be construed under this baseline. While Serbia and Russia perceive the dialogue as a means to question Kosovo's statehood, and the agreement, as

an outcome, a replica to support Russia's malicious intents towards Bosnia, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as well as the former territories of "Soviet universe" in the short term.

Amid these observations, obscurity around the dialogue process is not shared by Frederica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – also Vice-President of the European Commission – who, since 2014, is facilitating the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The EU's foreign policy chief, as of 2018, hopes the last phase of the dialogue will conclude with a positive outcome (by the end of 2019), a solution that comprehensively addresses open questions and helps normalization of relations through a legally binding agreement. In the same vein, President Trump perceives this phase of the dialogue as unique, and a chance within reach to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement that balances the interests of both Kosovo and Serbia.

Yet, except being bold on their hopes and expectations neither of them is able or willing to outline what Kosovo and its people have to sacrifice in exchange. As those involved in the dialogue seem more bemused with the end of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue than by its outcome, WE beg to differ and argue that the comprehensive agreement may be the beginning of the demise of Kosovo's identity as a consociational democracy and the West's honorable past in relation to Kosovo. To be more specific, there are three main reasons prompting such a concern. They remain the motives why the EU (especially the UK, Germany and France) and the US should be more cautious.

The first is related to the unconventional and preposterous schemes that shifted the dialogue and its aims, partially with the EU's "Amen" and concurrently, Kosovo's leadership sharp ignorance. The initial bulk of agreements were openly questioning

consociational and multi-ethnic character of Kosovo. In this last phase, as it shifts, this pattern may threaten the very foundations of Kosovo's existence due to the type of relativism and opacity with which Kosovo question was and is being approached. This is indeed why the EU and the US should feel our apprehension.

As an example, currently, in and around the dialogue process, questions such as: a) what Kosovo is prepared to sacrifice in exchange for recognition by Serbia; b) shall partition of a part of its territory be an option, and, c) is autonomy and fragmentation of the government based on ethnic background acceptable – dominate the discourse. Altogether, except being fallacious, they neglect the very meaning of the dialogue, the past, and what Kosovo symbolizes in the memories of the western democracies. The dialogue, in the naivest terms, is not about Europe and America giving-up, rearranging, and/or aiding to further deepen the historical divide between Serbs and Albanians. On the contrary, it is about western democracies, particularly the EU and US, being able to maintain their commitment to peace based on principles of liberal democracy. Kosovo stands as unique – sui generis some would suggest – both in terms of its history and complexity in the involvement of western democracies in its emergence as a state. Regardless of references to Kosovo as a precedent for other separatist regions, examples of secession and state-building processes akin to it have not since been replicated. Kosovo has been recognized by 116 countries, notwithstanding internal threats to democracy induced by corruption and immaturity of political leadership, it remains a stable and developing democracy. Therefore, there is no just cause supporting the reasoning that the dialogue should be a forum for open exchange of ideas and solutions, and Kosovo be central part of it.

In relation to Vucic, the West should not challenge the view that he is not able to

decipher what is best for Serbia's present and future. But they have to insist that he does the next step, and starts detaching himself from his past and ideas that he (used to) support(s). So far, using the Balkan archaic model of action and posture, he was able to remain in the game of the dialogue, not deliver on his promises and reinforce the hopes among the people of Serbia that Kosovo is not lost. For the majority of those that are able to interpret the reality and proximity of something being altered, this policy is a failure. However, in Serbia, as elsewhere in the Balkans (including Kosovo), this message is not grasped among the majority of the population. Vucic keeps Serbia near enough to the doorsteps of the EU, but he ensures that Putin's status of a 'rock star' and the dignity of Russia within Serbia remain intact. At present, even his behavior has a tendency to resemble Putin. While, after a decade of positive trends in terms of democratization, Serbia has again joined the club of authoritarian regimes. The recent scoring of the Freedom House demonstrates it best. And of course, the EU and the US recognize the reasons why.

On the other hand, we, as do many independent thinkers, question how can such a policy be successful in the long run? The reasons are simple. The stability was long required in Serbia. Vucic was the one finally providing it. And as the last elite of European and Western diplomats have either retired or are dead, the current elite managing EU relations with the Balkans is not able to deconstruct the secrets of the Balkans leadership (Serb and Kosovar leadership included). A type of intelligence mixed with duplicity is a characteristic of the majority of political leaders. Inducing mistrust, cultivating the wisdom of ambiguity, and encouraging populism remain the easy steps to their success. They (Serb and Kosovar leadership alike) commit but act differently, they express the oath of allegiance to democracy but concentrate their power only within the reach of their

pockets, and they have become the perfect examples of alternating personalities. In Brussels and elsewhere they are different, humble, democrats and willing to deliver on anything. In their home countries they are nasty, authoritarian, populist and corrupt. The only way to make them commit and deliver is to touch upon the very foundations of their power authority. Thereupon we reckon that the EU and the US should perceive the comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia among others, as a means to end the authoritarianism and encourage a peaceful Balkan spring. The misuse of conflict between Kosovo and Serbia by elites has deteriorated interethnic relations, increased cross-border corruption and organized crime, and diminished chances of fast-tracked development for the whole region. Above all, the Balkans (especially Serbia and Kosovo) remains a region that is most affected by emigration of youth and highly skilled employees. Regardless of the persistence of the exiting leadership to keep this status-quo, the EU and the US should comprehend this agreement as a contribution to the stability of the entire region. They need, particularly; to convey their message to the leadership of Serbia that Kosovo's statehood will not be questioned. While for Kosovo leadership should be clear that Ahtisaari plan remains key to Kosovo's identity and future. Dialogue is merely a tool that will enable Serbia unfetter from the saga of Kosovo, and help Kosovo to further prosper. The dialogue will not help Serbia bring Kosovo back, neither part of Serbian inhabited areas. However, the dialogue may ensure that Serbia will further stabilize, democratize, while its economy will continue to grow, as will the region.

On a different note, expectations that the EU is falling apart remain immature. The EU is coping with its internal threats (the recent European elections only confirm it), in its own way, and at present, remains far more prepared to respond to the conflicts and authoritarian regimes elsewhere in Europe

than it was in the past. Individual states have become more important and the center of Europe has reinforced (especially the role of France and Germany) while insecurity and vulnerability among those standing aside has increased. Most of the EU member states are prone to attach to the center than shy away from it. This means that there is even less leeway for Serbia and Vucic to try and use Kosovo and the dialogue as leverage for his populist ideas. In the same time, his idea about a solution for Kosovo that extends the ambiguity, favors partition and divides power based on ethnic elements remains an example of bungle.

The second is about Europe's and US memory and forgetfulness. The EU and the US should not forget the values of its past. Jointly they should not erase their memories for ideas they embraced and ideals they affirmed when they decided to help Kosovo achieve its independence. The EU should not remain keen to open the road to forgetfulness and hope their agreement may help people of Kosovo find, yet again, new dreams. The US and the EU have recognized Kosovo on the basis of it being able to accept Ahtisaari plan, in its entirety, helping the latter establish a constitutional system that transcends ethnicity as an element of divide. Kosovo's governing system distinguishes multi-ethnicity, multi-culturalism, integration and citizenry as its symbol.

Being ardent fans of an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia that will ensure peace rather than extend the 'muddle', WE are still – as many people faithful to democracy – guessing what would a comprehensive agreement entail. That is why the EU and the US need to address its inability and assert its influence throughout its neighborhood. They both helped Kosovo emerge as a State and simultaneously Serbia democratize; they need yet another thrust to make Serb leadership remember its dark past and ask for forgiveness. The best way to achieve that

is to separate, once and for all, from designs and solutions that demise democracy.

The EU's and US inability to retain their sphere of influence and bar forces of evil to influence their choices is pretty remarkable. On the one hand the US is not vigorously focusing on Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. The dialogue necessitates red lines that parties as well as EU's foreign policy chief, Mogherini, need to adhere. In relation to the latter, there is not much to be done. The US and the EU are well acquainted with principles that give shape to a democracy. A solution that prioritizes territory over people, ethnic division over integration, and despair over hope cannot be a symbol of western democracies pride. On the other hand, having regard the ever-increasing affinities of Serb leadership to drive Russia mingle in the dialogue, the outcome may rely on choices that offend democracy rather than help restore its place within Kosovo and Serbia. Russia has no place in the dialogue, and may not regard either Serbia or Kosovo as part of the post-soviet sphere, as should Serbia recognize that its future is within EU and limit itself from actions that fetter Serbia with unpredicted Putin.

Finally, on the opposite what has been suggested, Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is not merely about the future. It is more about the past and memories. The past that shows how democracies shape democracies, how values of human rights and fundamental freedoms are able to break the limits of fear, and about memories that help us recite the values West used to embrace.

Still, altogether this policy may again fail, along with the idea that Kosovo and Serbia can reach an agreement. Overcoming such a failure may be challenging.

The idea that no agreement is a catastrophe is erroneous. There is no magic formula to cure those hearts (in Serbia) that still perceive Kosovo as the cradle of their

identity. Political leadership in Serbia, regardless of the reality, has every right to remain in vein and hope that a prosperous future for Serbia is guaranteed. But there is every reason to believe that Kosovo's future is not fettered with it. As there is no reason to believe that Kosovo, the EU and US should keep the dialogue with Serbia a priority. Kosovo needs an awakening. A remodeled Marshall Plan for Kosovo supported by unprecedented vetting and political reforms

is a simple task forward. People of Kosovo are long waiting for it. Above all, Kosovo as a regional power, stable and prosperous country is yet a "hymn" that has not been heard. It will then change not only prospects for an agreement, but the entire region.

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