

International Competition and Geopolitical Stakes in the Framework of the Resumption of the Kosovo- Serbia Dialogue

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Authors: Alejandro Estesó Pérez*, Arbër Fetahu**

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Group for Legal and Political Studies
“Rexhep Luci” str. 16/1
Prishtina 10 000, Kosovo
Website: www.legalpoliticalstudies.org
E-mail: office@legalpoliticalstudies.org
Tel/fax.: +381 38 234 456

*International Research Fellow at Group for Legal and Political Studies

**Research Fellow at Group for Legal and Political Studies

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION AND GEOPOLITICAL STAKES IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE RESUMPTION OF THE KOSOVO-SERBIA DIALOGUE

Introduction

Almost a decade has passed since the dialogue on the comprehensive normalisation of relations (the “dialogue”) between Kosovo and Serbia began. Following its inauguration, the process has been characterized by scenes of failure, tension and modest success, and its volatility has often threatened the prospects for continuation after several episodes of impasse. The dynamics of the negotiations have regularly been dictated by domestic and international developments, with Kosovo and Serbia finding themselves at the spotlight of European events on many occasions.

The course of the dialogue has oftentimes taken unexpected turns. One of the latest developments was the 100 per cent trade tariff imposed by the Kosovo government in November 2018 on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a response to Serbia’s foreign lobbying campaign against Kosovo’s accession into international organizations, such as Interpol. For almost twenty months since that move, the dialogue was suspended – with both parties remaining hostile and holding rigid positions. Against this backdrop, a viable solution seemed far from achievable. However, the dialogue decidedly resumed on July 16th 2020 amid high international pressure, as a result –and at the cost– of bringing down the Kosovo government led by former Prime Minister Albin Kurti.

This policy report will make a thorough assessment of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in the light of its resumption from a diversity of angles, highlighting its successes and critically pointing out its shortcomings. To this end, the first block of content will consist of a well-developed and comprehensive timeline, where the main events that marked the turbulent course of the dialogue will be identified and analytically explained. Followingly, it will delve into a thorough political assessment of the involvement and ambitions of major world powers –the European Union (EU), the United States (US), Russia and China– in the process of the dialogue, digging deep into their interests and broader strategic, geopolitical and ideological aspirations. The third and last section will be devoted to advancing an in-depth discussion on the future of the dialogue – where it is heading, what there is to fix, what the prospects for success are, and where Kosovo is standing at this point in time.

1. The bumpy road to an agreement: understanding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue

Over the past years, the EU-led dialogue on the comprehensive normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia has undergone a process of metamorphosis. Since its start, the dialogue has been seen with scepticism by both countries’ establishments. The development of the negotiations was set out in two stages: the first stage, a technical dialogue, which commenced on March 8th, 2011; and the second, the political dialogue.¹ Whereas the so-called technical dialogue entailed various deals concerning freedom of movement, mutual recognition of diplomas, and civil registry,² the process soon stepped into the political field in October 2012, with both countries’ heads of government leading talks under the auspices of the EU and its High Representative for Foreign Affairs. Ever since then, the political dialogue continues to dominate the negotiations, as a

¹ 2019. The Substance and Status of Implementation of Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue Agreements. *RIDEA*, [online] October 2019. Available at: http://www.ridea-ks.org/Articles/3/Images/29-01-2019/591118_The_Substance_and_Status_of_Implementation_of_Kosovo-Serbia_Dialogue'_Agreements.pdf > [Accessed 7 August 2020].

² Russell, M. 2019. Serbia-Kosovo relations: Confrontation or normalization? Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf) > [Accessed 10 August 2020].

consequence of which the ambitious Brussels Agreement was signed in 2013. This text, which envisaged the formation of the Association of Serb Municipalities, was found not in line with Kosovo's constitutional standards in several of its principles. Consequently, the Agreement is not fully implemented yet, but it has already served as a catalyst for disparities between Prishtina and Belgrade. While 33 bilateral agreements have been signed overall, a significant number of them have been partially implemented or not implemented at all.³

Since the start of the dialogue, the general tone of the meetings had been progressively acrimonious, with threats coming from both sides to pull out from the talks. The domestic issues outweighed the incentives for EU integration and normalization of relations,⁴ in which light several meetings were cancelled or delayed – a proof that the dialogue was driven by anger and fury rather than by rationality. The process was characterized by little commitment to both the agreements and the agenda that was foreseen to be implemented.

i. New ideas, bad ideas and the interruption of the dialogue

In November 2018, the talks abruptly ground to a halt after Kosovo decided to impose a 100 per cent trade tariff on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a response to Serbia's foreign lobbying campaign against Kosovo's accession into international organizations, like Interpol.⁵ This decision caused broad reactions in both Kosovo and Serbia, and clearly so among international stakeholders. EU High Representative Federica Mogherini swiftly asked for Kosovo's decision to be revoked, claiming it was a "clear violation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and of the spirit of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Union and Kosovo".⁶ Similarly, the US Mission in Kosovo urged for an immediate suspension of the tariffs, considering it a necessary measure to restore the momentum of the dialogue. The US had clearly stated that any measure that disrupted the dialogue, or was accompanied by a refusal to withdraw the tariffs, ran counter to American interests.⁷

The tariff move showed that relations between Kosovo and Serbia remained tense and far from a viable solution. As such, the stakes on the dialogue after the tariffs were imposed seemed to reach a new high: Kosovo's government restated that they would remain in place until the basis of mutual recognition between Prishtina and Belgrade was adopted,⁸ whereas Serbia insisted that a return to the negotiating table would only happen when the 100 per cent tax was lifted. The impasse on the EU-led normalization dialogue was felt in Brussels, as much as it was in Prishtina

³ 2019. The Substance and Status of Implementation of Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue Agreements. *RIDEA*, [online] October 2019. Available at: http://www.ridea-ks.org/Articles/3/Images/29-01-2019/591118_The_Substance_and_Status_of_Implementation_of_Kosovo-Serbia_Dialogue'_Agreements.pdf [Accessed 7 August 2020].

⁴ Russell, M. 2019. Serbia-Kosovo relations: Confrontation or normalization? Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf) [Accessed 10 August 2020].

⁵ 2018. Kosovo slaps 100% tariffs on Serbia, Bosnia, to 'defend vital interest'. *Radio Free Europe*, [online], 21 November. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-slaps-100-percent-tariffs-on-serbia-bosnia-to-defend-vital-interest-29613285.html> [Accessed 10 August 2020].

⁶ Matias, B. 2019. An analysis of the recent developments in the Kosovo - Serbia dialogue: A perspective from Brussels. *Group for Legal and Political Studies*, [online]. Available at: <http://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/An-analysis-srb-ks-dialogue-BM-Final.pdf> [Accessed 10 August 2020].

⁷ 2019. Statement from U.S. Embassy Prishtina" *U.S. Embassy in Kosovo*. [online], 21 January. Available at: <https://xk.usembassy.gov/statement-from-u-s-embassy-pristina-2/> [Accessed 10 August 2020].

⁸ 2019. Kosovo sets conditions to drop tariffs on Serbian imports. *Balkan Insight*, [online] 21 January. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/29/kosovo-uses-tariffs-as-bait-for-a-final-agreement-with-serbia-01-29-2019/> [Accessed 11 August 2020].

and Belgrade.⁹ Domestically, the tariffs divided Kosovo's political entities, with some agents backing the tariffs until mutual recognition was achieved, and others proposing a termination or suspension of the tariffs in order not to harm the relations with the EU and US.

Notwithstanding the tariff decision, the year 2018 was also characterized by the controversial discussion on the so-called potential *border correction* between Kosovo and Serbia. The idea was first introduced by the countries' presidents, Hashim Thaçi and Aleksandar Vučić, at the Alpbach 2018 forum. At the conference entitled "New perspectives on EU enlargement" both presidents disseminated the idea of border adjustments as a solution to the dispute: "countries in the region should not be afraid of a possible agreement between Kosovo and Serbia even if it includes border change. It will not be a correction along ethnic lines – Kosovo will continue to be a multi-ethnic country and to support minority rights", President Thaçi emphasised.¹⁰ On the other hand, Serbia's Vučić claimed that both territories were trying to avoid clashes and wars, yet he was committed to defend the interests of the Serbian community in Kosovo. Vučić, however, did not clearly respond to the question on whether Serbia would recognize Kosovo after a possible border adjustment solution.¹¹ Although it was never fully clarified, the idea of border correction entailed territorial exchange between Kosovo and Serbia – whereby the northern part of Kosovo, inhabited by a majority of ethnic Serbs, would be exchanged with the southern part of Serbia, largely populated by ethnic Albanians. The idea was accompanied by a large refusal from Kosovo's political elites and also from its citizens, and it generated wide discussion in the international domain. EU Member States, particularly Germany, were categorically against the idea, since the possibility of border correction would set a dangerous precedent in favour of other exchanges of territory along ethnic lines, which could prompt new conflicts in the Balkans.

However, the US, a major Kosovo ally, did not discard the border correction idea per se: "our policy, the US policy, is that if the two parties can work it out between themselves and reach an agreement, we don't exclude territorial adjustments. It's really not for us to say. We would not stand in the way, and I don't think anybody in Europe would stand in the way if the two parties to the dispute reached a mutually satisfactory settlement," US National Security Adviser John Bolton said.¹² The idea of border correction swiftly turned into an international discussion, and remained a hot topic used for internal animosities and disputes between high figures within the Trump administration. US Special Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations Richard Grenell stated that neither himself nor his government were holding negotiations, rejecting their involvement in any deal between Kosovo and Serbia engaging in border correction.¹³ Ever since it was proclaimed as a potential solution, the adjustment of borders took over the main topic in the dialogue, alongside the 100 per cent tariffs. While the latter measure was expressed mainly at a domestic level, the territorial exchange idea got broader attention and started posing many dilemmas and fears for the region.

⁹ Matias, B. 2019. An analysis of the recent developments in the Kosovo - Serbia dialogue: A perspective from Brussels. *Group for Legal and Political Studies*, [online]. Available at: <<http://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/An-analysis-srb-ks-dialogue-BM-Final.pdf>> [Accessed 11 August 2020].

¹⁰ 2018. Alpbach 2018 Forum: Thaçi and Vučić discuss border correction with the panel. *European Western Balkans*, [online] 21 July. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/08/25/alpbach-2018-forum-thaci-vucic-discuss-border-correction-panel/>> [Accessed 11 August 2020].

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 2018. US open to border changes, Trump adviser says. *Politico*, [online] 24 July. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/kosovo-border-changes-us-opinion-donald-trump-john-bolton/>> [Accessed 11 August 2020].

¹³ 2020. Joint Statement of Special Presidential Envoy Richard Grenell, Ambassador Philip Kosnett, and Special Representative for the Western Balkans Matthew Palmer on Kosovo. *U.S. Department of State, Media Note*, [online] 26 March. Available at: <<https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-special-presidential-envoy-richard-grenell-ambassador-philip-kosnett-and-special-representative-for-the-western-balkans-matthew-palmer-on-kosovo/>> [Accessed 11 August 2020].

ii. Breaking the deadlock: from Kurti to Hoti

The establishment of the tariffs and the calls for border correction determined the course of the dialogue since 2018, being these two issues the main sources for internal dispute, division, and confrontation between domestic and international political actors. In 2019, a turn in Kosovo's political scene occurred when Albin Kurti's party Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV) came out as the winner of the October elections and managed to form a coalition government with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). There was hope under Kurti's premiership that the dialogue would gain a renewed momentum, but intra-government disagreements around the tariffs and other conditions underlying the dialogue seemed to linger – and eventually served as the catalyst for the coalition government to fall, with LDK heading a successful no-confidence vote on Kurti's government.

Pressure to lift the tariffs and resume the negotiations with Serbia was high on Prime Minister Kurti, especially from the US, which was avidly pushing for the continuation of the dialogue. Prior to winning at the polls, Kurti had announced his pledge to replace the 100 per cent trade tax with full reciprocity with Serbia – a promise he delivered on. "Reciprocity, because equality", stated Kurti, entailing that he wanted a fully correlative relationship with Serbia.¹⁴ Substituting the tariffs with reciprocity was not supported by the US, which considered reciprocity a barrier that would obstruct the dialogue and hinder the economic prosperity of Kosovo. Consequently, confrontation between Kurti's government and the US was evident in that Kosovo's policies were not enough for Washington. Furthermore, Kurti had repeatedly declared that the main purpose behind the pressure to revoke the reciprocity measures, as well as behind the no-confidence vote raised against his government, was to successfully carry out the plan for border adjustments contemplated in 2018.

LDK, in unconditional alignment with the US, had long opposed Kurti's approach on reciprocity, threatening its government partner with leaving the coalition if these measures were not removed. Against this risk, and ultimately triggered by the dialogue deadlock and by the sacking of LDK Minister of Internal Affairs Agim Veliu, LDK managed to form a new government with party official Avdullah Hoti as prime minister.¹⁵ Amidst the crisis deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Hoti placed the resumption of the dialogue high on the agenda, alongside the restoration of relations with Kosovo's major allies in a clear nod to the US. Hoti's approach would stand in stark contrast to Kurti's: yes to a withdrawal of tariffs and no to reciprocity. Hoti considered the decision to revoke reciprocity as very important, aimed to restore the dialogue by removing all obstacles: "we have an agreement with our international friends and they will pressure Serbia to remove all obstacles in order for the dialogue to resume," he said.¹⁶ The decision paved the way for the new round of negotiations, a move praised by US and EU representatives, as well as by Serbian counterparts.

Prior to the resumption of negotiations, with the controversial no-confidence vote against the Kurti government still fresh, the EU had started reinforcing its role in the dialogue. After several episodes of US interference, and amid the alarming perception that Brussels was remaining in the shadow of its own process, newly-appointed EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell announced he would act as the main mediator between Kosovo and Serbia. As such,

¹⁴ 2020. Kosovo announces removal of tariffs on Serbian and Bosnian goods. *Euronews*, [online] 2 April. Available at: <<https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/kosovo-announces-removal-of-tariffs-on-serbian-and-bosnian-goods>> [Accessed on 11 August 2020].

¹⁵ 2020. Votohet Qeveria Hoti, Kurti e quan te paligjshme. *Radio Evropa e Lire*, [online] 3 June. Available at: <<https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kuvendi-qeveria-e-re-avdullah-hoti/30650046.html>> [Accessed 18 August 2020].

¹⁶ 2020. New Government of Kosovo revokes the reciprocity measures on import from Serbia. *European Western Balkans*, [online] 6 April. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/06/06/new-government-of-kosovo-revokes-the-reciprocity-measures-on-import-from-serbia/>> [Accessed 17 August 2020].

Borrell's first visit in office was set to occur in Prishtina,¹⁷ where he declared he would not impose any agreement on Kosovo and Serbia: "the solution can be reached out only through mutual dialogue", he stated.¹⁸ Despite his good intentions, Borrell's appointment was seen with suspicion due to his previous position as foreign minister of Spain – which raised many doubts in Kosovo about how he would oversee the dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade in a credible and balanced way, considering that Spain does not recognize Kosovo.¹⁹ Borrell has regularly claimed that he represents the EU and not any particular Member State, and that it is not his job to convince the five EU non-recognizers to recognize Kosovo.

That the EU is reframing and reinforcing its role in the dialogue with more presence and authority was further suggested by the appointment of Miroslav Lajčák as EU Special Representative for the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues on April 3rd. The tasks of the former Slovak foreign minister would be "to achieve comprehensive normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, improve good neighbourly relations and reconciliation between partners in Western Balkans, helping them overcome the legacy of the past, and contribute to the consistency and effectiveness of EU action in the Western Balkans".²⁰ In this position, Lajčák holds a big responsibility in restoring the dialogue's momentum and in reaffirming the role of the EU as the primary mediator of the negotiations.

On June 16th, Lajčák visited Prishtina in an attempt to test the waters towards the restoration of the talks and introduce itself as the Special Representative for the dialogue. He announced the EU's agenda and the aim of his mandate at the meetings he conducted with the main political leaders in Kosovo. Notwithstanding a moderate degree of scepticism among Kosovo's political elites, Lajčák stated that his mandate was directed to helping Belgrade and Prishtina reach a comprehensive legally binding agreement that closes all outstanding issues between the two parties and normalizes the relations. He posited that the EU's goal is to successfully conclude the dialogue,²¹ particularly amidst the recent episodes of US involvement and government crisis in Kosovo. While he openly welcomed cooperation with Washington, well aware of US intentions to push forward a Kosovo-Serbia meeting at the White House, Lajčák stressed that the dialogue was strictly an EU issue. Similar messages were delivered in Belgrade a few days later, with Lajčák reinforcing his institutional function and aiming for the new round of talks to resume.

iii. The Paris Summit and the resumption of the dialogue

The unpredictable nature of the dialogue has, ever since it started, often been accompanied by radical turns in its framework and substance. However, once the 100 per cent tariffs were lifted and the reciprocity revoked as soon as the Hoti government had taken office in Kosovo, the

¹⁷ 2019. Borrell to visit Kosovo first as EU foreign policy chief. *Politico*, [online] 11 November. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/borrell-visit-kosovo-first-as-eu-foreign-policy-chief-commission-hearings/>> [Accessed 18 August 2020].

¹⁸ 2020. "Borrell will not impose an agreement on Belgrade and Prishtina". *European Western Balkans*, [online] 30 January. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/01/30/borrell-eu-will-not-impose-an-agreement-on-belgrade-and-pristina/>> [Accessed 18 August 2020].

¹⁹ 2019. Borrell to visit Kosovo first as EU foreign policy chief. *Politico*, [online] 11 November. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/borrell-visit-kosovo-first-as-eu-foreign-policy-chief-commission-hearings/>> [Accessed 18 August 2020].

²⁰ 2020. Belgrade - Pristina dialogue: EU appoints a new Special Representative. *European Council*, [online] 3 April. Available at: <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/03/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-appoints-a-new-special-representative/>> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

²¹ 2020. Rruga e Kosoves drejt BE-se permes normalizimit te raporteve me Serbine. *DW*, [online] 16 June. Available at: <<https://www.dw.com/sq/laj%C3%A7ak-rruga-e-kosov%C3%ABs-drejt-be-s%C3%AB-p%C3%ABrmes-normalizimit-t%C3%AB-raporteve-me-serbin%C3%AB/a-53835912>> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

conditions to resume the talks were in place. Following a failed attempt to hold a US-brokered meeting at the White House on June 27th, put together by Special Envoy Grenell but which ultimately never took place,²² Germany and France pushed forward the holding of the so-called Paris Summit for the resumption of the negotiations. The summit was held via video conference on July 10th in the presence of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.²³

Notwithstanding its poor outcome and the sides' rigid stances, the holding of a virtual meeting after twenty months of standstill was a success in itself. At the discussion, Prime Minister Hoti stated that Kosovo's territorial integrity was not negotiable, that the constitutionality of the state would not be affected by any agreement, and that any agreement should be in accordance with the country's constitution. He added that mutual recognition is the only acceptable outcome for Kosovo²⁴ and that he would strive for the recognition of Kosovo by the five EU non-recognizers, membership in the United Nations (UN) and other international organizations, opening Kosovo's European perspective, and redressing cases of missing persons, war damages and casualties.²⁵ On the other hand, President Vučić said it was a 'hard talk', referring to the principles and objectives that Hoti strived for: "if this is the point of everything they want to talk about, everything is completely meaningless", Vučić stated.²⁶ These remarks evidenced that the negotiators would not be an easy task – however, once the virtual summit had called its end, both Hoti and Vučić agreed to resume the talks at an in-person meeting on July 16th. In spite of Kosovo's and Serbia's entrenched positions, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron pushed for the talks to be resumed in person.

Consequently, Hoti and Vučić met face to face after twenty months of dialogue standstill. Held under EU auspices, the meeting aimed to continue the process of the normalization of relations and restate Brussels' upper hand in the mediation tasks. High Representative Borrell welcomed both leaders and acknowledged their firm commitment to a dialogue led and moderated by the EU: "I encourage both sides to approach today's talks in the spirit of compromise and pragmatism, and with the European future for the people in Kosovo and Serbia in mind", he said.²⁷

Special Representative Lajčák, who mediated through the discussion, declared that the two sides had focused their negotiations on the issues of missing and displaced persons, as well as on economic aspects, upon which both delegations were encouraged to work with the International Committee of the Red Cross.²⁸ The countries' representatives did otherwise not shift from their previous well-known positions. While Hoti reaffirmed that the only viable solution is mutual recognition, Vučić opposed this approach stating that Kosovo wanted everything solved overnight and make Serbia unconditionally accept – which, according to the Serbian president, was not going to happen. Yet against such a backdrop of evident underlying disparities, both sides agreed to move forward to future rounds of discussion. With eyes set on September 7th as the scheduled date for the second EU-sponsored meeting since the standstill, Kosovo and Serbia

²² The high-level meeting at the White House was then rescheduled and held on September 4th.

²³ 2020. Kosovo-Serbia talks in Paris close without results. *Balkan Insight*, [online] 10 July. Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/10/kosovo-serbia-talks-in-paris-close-without-results/>> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 2020. Belgrade - Pristina Dialogue: Doorstep by HR/VP Borrell upon arrival at the second high level meeting. *European Union External Action*, [online] 16 July. Available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/83019/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-doorstep-hrvp-borrell-upon-arrival-second-high-level-meeting_en> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

²⁸ 2020. Leaders of Kosovo and Serbia agree to continue talks after the first in-person meeting in 20 months. *Radio Free Europe*, [online] 16 July. Available at: <<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-eu-talks-hoti-vucic/30732146.html>> [Accessed 20 August 2020].

agreed to establish national expert teams to discuss the outcome of the first meeting at a technical level. In this light, Special Representative Lajčák hosted a discussion on July 23rd between Kosovo's national coordinator on the dialogue, Skender Hyseni, and his Serbian counterpart, the director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Marko Đurić – of which little information has been made public: “Kosovo and Serbia have been invited to send their experts to continue discussing issues that have already been discussed at the level of leaders last Thursday. We would not share further information about the meeting at the expert level”, stated EU spokeswoman on foreign and security policy Nabila Massral.²⁹

The secrecy around the outcomes of the last meetings might explain the overall vagueness surrounding what has been made public thus far. It could arguably be deemed as a sign of progress that both parties have agreed to meet and discuss a variety of pressing topics, although no particular deal has been struck, let alone signed. The perception that the dialogue is gradually leaning to one of a more technical nature has raised many eyebrows in Kosovo, an indication that much work is yet to be done in the light of Prishtina's and Belgrade's diverging sets of goals and aspirations.

2. Unravelling the role and interests of major world powers in the dialogue

During the past two years, the US and the EU have visibly strived to vie for the upper hand over the course of the dialogue with greater or lesser success, not least owing to their vested interests in Kosovo and in the Western Balkan region. Against a backdrop of damaged relations between both stakeholders, added to an upcoming election that can foreseeably put an end to Donald Trump's administration in the US, the outlook is arguably bound to shift sharply. In spite of their comparatively active engagement, however, Brussels and Washington are far from being the sole agents for which stakes are high. This block of content will thus delve into the geopolitical, ideological and commercial aspirations in the framework of the dialogue of not only the US and the EU, but also of Russia and China as major global powers, in order to further break down and interpret the context against which the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue has hitherto been taking place.

i. The European Union

The EU's engagement in Kosovo and, in a broader sense, the Western Balkan region, has been of particular relevance during the past two decades. After the 1999 war, as envisaged in the framework of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1244, the EU has been present and active on the ground through its Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) established in 2008, with the task of assisting the local authorities “in establishing sustainable and independent rule of law institutions”.³⁰ This mandate has worked in parallel to the political and institutional endeavour of rendering Kosovo a full-fledged EU member in the foreseeable future, as part of Brussels' enlargement strategy. It is in the EU's best interest to safeguard stability across the region and to promote good neighbourly relations among its territories, a claim which many representatives have echoed throughout the years.³¹ As far as the dialogue is concerned, EU authorities have been dealing with a double-lane process: first, that of sparking the favourable conditions for an acceptable deal between both sides – but also that of bringing both partners closer to EU

²⁹ 2020. Bilateral meetings between Belgrade - Pristina with Lajčák held in Brussels. *European Western Balkans*, [online] 23 July. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/23/bilateral-meetings-between-belgrade-and-pristina-with-lajcak-held-in-brussels/>> [Accessed 20 August 2020].

³⁰ EULEX. About EULEX. [online] Available at: <<https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/?page=2,60>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

³¹ 2019. Hahn: European Perspective, the Only Guarantee for the Balkans. *RTK Live*, [online] 7 November. Available at: <<https://www.rtklive.com/en/news-single.php?ID=15218>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

membership. Serbia, as a well-advanced candidate, and Kosovo, as a potential candidate, are both walking down this path.

As a privileged fellow of both Kosovo and Serbia, not least due to its historical-geographical ties and its undeniable role as a strong trading partner, the EU has held the responsibility of leading the dialogue. The resumption of the talks in mid-2020 was close to the inauguration of the new European Commission (EC), headed by President Ursula von der Leyen, for a five-year period. Among the authorities elected as part of the new Commission was High Representative Borrell.³² Then, the appointment of Miroslav Lajčák as Special Representative, which shortly ensued, reaffirmed these ambitions.

However, things have not been on the EU's side lately. For some time now, the EU has been finding itself at an existential crossroads. The lack of a unified and clear ideological path has resulted, as far as the dialogue is concerned, in the portrayal of a rather inconclusive role – evidencing the weak position enlargement as a foreign policy tool is holding at this moment. Brussels has been criticised on repeated occasions for not stepping up its game as a mediator and, recently, for letting the leverage over the dialogue drift away into the hands of the US. This arguable lack of initiative perfectly falls into the broader point of impasse the EU is currently facing, triggered to a large extent by an ongoing identity crisis. The effects of the 2008 financial crisis in Southern Europe, the farewell to the United Kingdom following the Brexit vote, the 2015 refugee crisis and the ongoing debate on migrants and asylum seekers, the rise of populist and Eurosceptic movements, and the COVID-19 pandemic – everything has contributed to weakening a once unified EU. Such political developments over the past years have forced the EU to look itself in the mirror and figure out what kind of political and economic organisation it wants to be, what there is to fix and when to begin.

It has been mostly due to these political ups-and-downs that the notion of enlargement has reached a standstill. Member States, and to a certain extent central EU institutions, are not as eager anymore, as they were after the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargement waves, to further expand the Union and integrate the six bidders from the Western Balkan region³³ – at least not for now. In this uneasy context, thus, the EU is deliberately pursuing a cautious but potentially unstable strategy: it is juggling between, on the one hand, its efforts to reboot and strengthen the dialogue; and, on the other hand, its unspoken approach of enlargement containment. Even though Brussels is well aware of the clear lack of realistic prospects for Serbia and Kosovo to join the EU in the near future, it seems fixated in offering membership as the ultimate prize³⁴ – a carrot-and-stick scheme that is running out of steam and that will not last forever.

There are at least three main reasons why the EU should revise its hitherto double-edged strategy. Firstly, the growing influence of major world powers across the Western Balkans is a factor to watch, a proof that Brussels' current approach is not enough and that more action is required: the EU is losing appeal as the preferred political and trading partner, while actors like China are expanding in the region. Linked to this, secondly, is the likelihood that membership is no longer considered a sought-for reward: a country like Serbia might, in the long run, feel more comfortable in its ambiguous role between the West and the East, as its recent commercial flirting with Beijing

³² 2020. The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue is starting again. *European External Action Service* [online] 17 July. Available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/83102/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-starting-again_en> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

³³ Juncker, J. C., 2014. *A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission*. Strasbourg.

³⁴ 2017. Serbia and Kosovo agree final steps for implementation of justice agreement in meeting of EU-facilitated Dialogue. *European External Action Service* [online] 1 September. Available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eu-facilitated-dialogue-belgrade-pristina-relations/31573/serbia-and-kosovo-agree-final-steps-implementation-justice-agreement-meeting-eu-facilitated_en> [Accessed 17 August 2020].

reveals.³⁵ Thirdly, and probably most importantly, is the fact that Kosovo's and Serbia's citizens are losing hope and trust in the European project overall. Among the wider public prevails the idea that, after endless episodes of futile engagement and empty promises, EU institutions have lost credibility and are out of touch with the population – leading to a void of political disenfranchisement that major world powers are eager to fill.

ii. The United States

Since 1999, Kosovo regards the US as an essential ally and the main guarantor of its security. The US supported Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, being among the first to recognize the newest state in the world at that time. Ever since the conflict ended, Kosovo and the US have built sustainable diplomatic and security relations, particularly significant for Kosovo's position in the international arena.³⁶ Furthermore, in terms of economy and aid, Kosovo is the largest recipient of US foreign assistance in the Western Balkans,³⁷ something that has made American involvement in the country consistent and substantial.

The aspirations and motivations of the US in the context of the dialogue are aligned with NATO intervention, the consistent support of independence of Kosovo, its state-building process, and containment of Russian influence in the Western Balkans. All of these are embroiled with the ideological and geopolitical interests that the US wants to settle in the region. The US was initially a strong supporter of the EU-led dialogue, and urged both Kosovo and Serbia to participate in a process that would possibly normalize the relations between the two.³⁸ Washington's role in the dialogue was significant for Kosovo, yet not determinant for the process as a whole; however, the Trump administration has been noticeably engaged in its progress and developments since 2018. A remarkable proof of this involvement was the letter from President Trump to Presidents Taçi and Vučić in December 2018: in what was considered as a surprise message, Trump urged his two counterparts to seize the opportunity to normalize the relations, and highlighted the need for mutual recognition as a central element.³⁹ The historic accord that would seal a peace deal, according to the US president, would pave the way for economic prosperity, peace and EU integration for both countries. On the contrary, should they fail to capitalize on this opportunity, it would be a "tragic setback, as another chance for comprehensive peace is unlikely to occur again soon", Trump stated in his letter.⁴⁰ Through this move, US involvement in the dialogue was swiftly turning course. The letter reaffirmed American interests in striking a deal, with an unequivocal position towards the final outcome. Moreover, the US showed that it wanted to emphasise its presence in the dialogue and stamp, once again, its authority in the region. While Trump's letter was praised by Kosovo's leaders, like President Taçi, Serbia's President Vučić was sceptical that a fast deal could be reached in a year.⁴¹

³⁵ Živanović, M. 2018. \$3bn Economic Agreements Boost China's Role in Serbia. *Balkan Insight*, [online] 18 September. Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/18/new-agreements-boost-china-role-in-serbia-09-18-2018/>> [Accessed 17 August 2020].

³⁶ Matias, B.2020. What to make of the recent Grenell-facilitated agreements between Kosovo and Serbia. *Group for Legal and Political Studies*, [online] April, Available at: <http://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/PolicyNote032020_RecentAgreementswithBelgradeGLPS.pdf> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

³⁷ 2020. Kosovo: Background and US Policy. *Congressional Research Service*, [online] 5 May. Available at: <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46175.pdf>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 2018. Trump urges Kosovo to seize chance for peace with Serbia'. *Politico*, [online] 18 December. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-urges-kosovo-hashim-thaci-to-seize-chance-for-peace-with-serbia/>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ 2018. Serbia's Vučić doesn't share Trump's optimism on Kosovo deal. *Politico*, [online] 19 December. Available at <<https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-aleksandar-vucic-doesnt-share-us-president-trumps-optimism-on-kosovo-deal-hashim-thaci/>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

In its role as an ally, the US's position towards Kosovo remained consistent, proclaiming mutual recognition as a core solution in any agreement between Prishtina and Belgrade. To this end, the Trump administration appointed Matthew Palmer as its Special Representative for the Western Balkans in August 2019,⁴² and Richard Grenell as its Special Presidential Envoy for Kosovo and Serbia peace talks in October 2019.⁴³ These appointments were considered to evidence President Trump's interest in securing a comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, signaling a greater involvement of the US in the process and in the region in general. The President's hand in the dialogue has not been, however, exempted from bipartisan divisions. While the US stance towards Kosovo and Serbia had traditionally been based on wide consensus across the political spectrum,⁴⁴ Trump seems to have circumvented this unwritten rule and made his approach evolve within a small circle of people – with Grenell as the foremost figure.

In his visit to Prishtina in November 2019, Special Representative Palmer had pushed forward for resumption of the negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. He restated the need for the 100 percent tariffs to be dropped and asked for a responsible approach from the Kosovo political class towards the dialogue: “resolving once and for all the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia through full normalization remains a US strategic priority, one that will have an enormous impact on the people and the broader region”, Palmer stated in his speech.⁴⁵ The American policy around the dialogue caused a shift in the mediating process, entering into a terrain that had traditionally been reserved to the EU. While the greater engagement of the US was welcomed by certain leaders in Kosovo, the disparities on several issues, such as the tariffs and the application of reciprocity measures, started becoming evident.

In parallel to Palmer, albeit through a different approach and style, Special Envoy Richard Grenell pushed in an unconventional manner President Trump's policy over the dialogue. His message was clear: both Kosovo and Serbia should focus on economic cooperation and development, considering the economy as an imperative for any solution.⁴⁶ Grenell abruptly managed to strike two letters of intent between both parties: first, an agreement to restore mutual railway connections, and second, an agreement to restore direct air connections between the two countries. The letters inevitably caught EU stakeholders and many political representatives in Kosovo and Serbia by surprise. At once, the process of the dialogue had fundamentally changed patterns: the US had managed to deliver, at least on paper, two potential agreements that would spread the message that the mediation and the dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade was not exclusively an EU matter. The US triggered a power shift within the dialogue, a move that has recently translated into a rhetorical struggle between two competing narratives led by Washington, on the one hand, and Brussels, on the other hand.

⁴² 2019. Matthew Palmer's Appointment as Special Representative for the Western Balkans. *U.S. Department of State*, [online] August 30. Available at: <<https://www.state.gov/matthew-palmers-appointment-as-special-representative-for-the-western-balkans/>> [Accessed 5 August 2020].

⁴³ 2019. Trump names Ric Grenell his Special Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo. *Politico*, [online] October 5. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-names-ric-grenell-his-special-envoy-for-serbia-and-kosovo/>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁴⁴ 2020. Former U.S. Secretary of State criticizes the Trump Administration for departing from a long held bi-partisan approach on Kosov. *Exit*, [online] 10 May. Available at: <<https://exit.al/en/2020/05/10/former-u-s-secretary-of-state-criticizes-trump-administration-for-departing-from-long-held-bipartisan-approach-on-kosovo/>> [Accessed on 25 August 2020].

⁴⁵ 2019. “Special Representative for the Western Balkans Matthew Palmer - Speech in Prishtina”. *U.S. Embassy in Kosovo*, [online] 1 November. Available at: <<https://xk.usembassy.gov/special-representative-for-the-western-balkans-matthew-palmer/>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁴⁶ Matias, B. 2020. What to make of the recent Grenell-facilitated agreements between Kosovo and Serbia. *Group for Legal and Political Studies*, [online] April, Available at: <http://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/PolicyNote032020_RecentAgreementwithBelgradeGLPS.pdf> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

The US posited the need to end a long-lasting process with a viable and fast solution. However, the incentives to push forward a quick settlement between Kosovo and Serbia are still debatable. While it can be argued that the Trump administration is, to this day, driven by its electoral agenda through securing itself a foreign policy win, in geopolitical terms the US is restating its authority over both Kosovo and the wider Balkan region – which it actually never left.

iii. Russia

The ambitions and aspirations of Russia in the context of the dialogue are manifestly framed within Moscow's unequivocal support for Serbia. Not only is there a widespread belief in Russia that Serbia is their last ally in Europe, to a large extent nurtured by the domain of shared Orthodox values,⁴⁷ but also a historical tradition of partnership and solidarity between the two countries that developed intensely throughout the twentieth century which has remained until now.⁴⁸

Russia's siding with Serbia vis-à-vis Kosovo is based, historical and cultural ties aside, upon two main doctrinal pillars: first, Russia's support for territorial integrity and sovereignty of States; second, its rejection of unilateral actions and breaches of international law. Accordingly, Moscow's reaction to Kosovo's declaration of independence, which was carried out unilaterally and against the territorial integrity of Serbia, was of stark opposition and condemnation. Russia pledged support for the authorities in Belgrade towards finding a way out of the situation.⁴⁹ Independence for Kosovo, officials in Moscow believed, would open Pandora's Box for smaller regions, rather than republics, to defy the rule of their parent States and seek secession from them.⁵⁰ Since then, Russia continued to defend the establishment of a negotiating table between Serbia and Kosovo and, aware that any resolution would set a new precedent in international practice, persistently opposed the imposition of any solution that Serbia would not find acceptable.

In spite of the outrage caused by the "Kosovo precedent", and possibly even encouraged by it, Russia's ideological paradigm in terms of foreign policy was about to undergo a strategic transformation – making its open refusal to secessionism and unilateral actions be questioned. Indeed, barely a few months after Kosovo's independence, Russia recognized the self-proclaimed statehoods of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and again in the year 2014 it accepted the region of Crimea's unilateral secession from Ukraine. In all three cases, Kosovo's experience was cited as a grounds for secession and Russia did not formulate any objections to this. In fact, Moscow cleverly developed new policy narratives to legitimize its responsibility in and towards Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea through tactics of legal ambiguity and distorted reinterpretations of history,⁵¹ a move that was highly criticized by Western governments under accusations of holding double standards towards unilateral secession and the preservation of territorial integrity.

In its role as Serbia's main defender, Moscow's position has remained consistent in that any potential agreement struck between Serbia and Kosovo should, firstly, be in accordance with UNSC resolution 1244 and, secondly, be submitted to the UNSC for endorsement as a matter of

⁴⁷ Antonenko, O. 2007. Russia and the Deadlock over Kosovo. *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 21. Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales.

⁴⁸ 2019. "Odnosi Srbije i Rusije na istorijski najvišem nivou". *RTS*, [online] 3 October. Available at: <<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3683433/odnosi-srbije-i-rusije-na-istorijski-najvisem-nivou.html>> [Accessed 5 August 2020].

⁴⁹ 2008. Medvedev pledges support for Serbia. *Al Jazeera*, [online] 25 February. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2008/02/2008525124618498728.html>> [Accessed 5 August 2020].

⁵⁰ Antonenko, O. 2007. Russia and the Deadlock over Kosovo. *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 21. Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales.

⁵¹ Rotaru, V. and Troncotă, M. 2017. Continuity and change in instrumentalizing "The Precedent". How Russia uses Kosovo to legitimize the annexation of Crimea. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17(3), 325-345.

global peace and security.⁵² In such a scenario, where a solution acceptable for Serbia would be found, Russia would refrain from exercising its veto power and would thus not block the settlement of the issue.⁵³ The current state of the dialogue, however, can hardly foresee such a development of events in the short or medium term, but Russia has anyway remained acquiescent over the EU's leading the process.

Relations between the Serbian and Russian central governments are faithful and relatively lively, Kosovo's unsettled status being one of the main motivations for enhanced diplomatic collaboration. On June 18th, only two days before the holding of parliamentary elections in Serbia, president Vučić welcomed Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov in Belgrade. Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić likewise held a separate meeting with his Russian counterpart, where Kosovo was reportedly the central topic of discussion. Lavrov reiterated Russia's unconditional support for Serbia and warned the EU not to isolate itself around the dialogue process, highlighting that Russia would continue standing up for Serbia's interests in the international arena.⁵⁴

Barely a week after the bilateral encounter, and only a few days following Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party's (SNS) landslide victory at the polls, the Serbian president travelled to Moscow to meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. The leaders discussed key issues in the political and commercial realms, focusing on Kosovo and on the preparations ahead of the (ultimately failed) June meeting at the White House⁵⁵ – with Vučić highlighting that Russia, as Serbia's historical ally, must have a say in the process of normalization of relations with Prishtina: "We do not want everyone to be consulted and asked without anyone asking Russia",⁵⁶ the Serbian president stated. At the meeting, Putin revealed his intention of paying an official visit to Serbia in October this year.⁵⁷

In all, Russia's support for Serbia's cause falls within Moscow's broader movement of ideological opposition to the West, which it has been spearheading for over one decade. Thus, even though it implicitly acknowledges the EU's responsibility over the dialogue, a view that would sharply change should the US take over the leading role, Russia has attempted to reap the benefits of sowing political leverage and loyalty within its few remaining State partners in Europe – contributing, firstly, to a delegitimization of the Western discourse on self-determination and freedom and, secondly, to countering the spread of such values while reinforcing its own.

iv. China

The role of China in the dialogue has traditionally been of a modestly passive reach in comparison with that of the EU, the US and Russia. However, as a major global political and economic player, authorities in Beijing have remained outspoken and reasonably involved in the developments of the negotiations, mostly through its manifest support for Serbia. Unlike Russia's backing, largely

⁵² 2020. AP o poseti Lavrova Srbiji: Samit o Kosovu planiran u SAD, a Rusija za posredovanje EU. *Danas*, [online] 18 June. Available at: <<https://www.danas.rs/politika/ap-o-poseti-lavrova-srbiji-samit-o-kosovu-planiran-u-sad-a-rusija-za-posredovanje-eu/>> [Accessed 4 August 2020].

⁵³ 2020. Bocan-Harčenko: Rešenje kosovskog pitanja da bude utvrđeno novom rezolucijom. *N1 Info*, [online] 9 May. Available at: <<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a597592/Bocan-Harcenko-Resenje-kosovskog-pitanja-da-bude-utvrdjeno-novom-rezolucijom.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2020].

⁵⁴ Božić Krainčanić, S., 2020. Vučić: Od Lavrova zabrinjavajuće informacije po pitanju Kosova. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, [online] 18 June. Available at: <<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/lavrov-u-beogradu-ima-li-rusija-razloga-za-brigu-/30676197.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2020].

⁵⁵ 2020. Vučić nakon sastanka: Putin je suviše mudar i veliki. *Direktno*, [online] 23 June. Available at: <<https://direktno.rs/politika/283038/vucic-nakon-sastanka-putin-je-suvise-mudar-i-veliki.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2020].

⁵⁶ 2020. The meeting behind closed doors started: Vucic and Putin on a tête-à-tête meeting. *B92*, [online] 23 June. Available at: <https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2020&mm=06&dd=23&nav_id=108763> [Accessed 5 August 2020].

⁵⁷ 2020. Vučić sa Putinom u Moskvi o idejama i načinima za rešavanje kosovskog problema. *N1 Info*, [online] 23 June. Available at: <<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a612888/Sastanak-Vucica-i-Putina-u-Moskvi.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2020].

based on a shared cultural heritage, China has granted Belgrade a principle-inspired support based on ideological convergence. In recent years, moreover, further support in the shape of investments and commercial transactions into Serbia has deepened the partnership between both countries.

China adheres fervently to the defense of State sovereignty and integrity, the same way it opposes, at least rhetorically, unilateral actions that violate international law. Hence, China's reaction to Kosovo's declaration of independence was of outright rejection and concern.⁵⁸ Far from supporting Prishtina's unilateral way, China defended diplomatic negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo as a way to reach a mutually acceptable solution. Being home to several secessionist movements within its borders, such as in Tibet and Xinjiang, China was particularly aware of the dangerous precedent Kosovo's recognition would set for its own territorial struggles.⁵⁹ Such were the stakes that, in 2009, Beijing participated for the first time in an International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion hearing – as part of the legal procedure triggered by Serbia whereby the Court was consulted on the lawfulness of Kosovo's unilateral independence. In their written statements, the Chinese representatives argued that sovereign States have the right to protect their territorial integrity, and claimed that the bilateral negotiating process had not been exhausted and independence was therefore not justified.⁶⁰

Just like for Russia, the violation of UNSC resolution 1244 has constituted a cornerstone in China's legal standing against Kosovo's independence. Beijing has consistently argued in favour of a final solution within the framework of this document where, it has claimed, Serbia's territorial integrity must be preserved.⁶¹ While its public diplomacy work around Kosovo has been mostly circumscribed to obstructive activity in the UNSC, China has would have ostensibly lobbied for the Belgrade-led Kosovo derecognition campaign – where Beijing would have used its commercial leverage upon smaller African States to force their withdrawal of Kosovo's recognition.⁶²

China has stepped up its presence in Serbia over the past few years, strategically focusing its rapprochement efforts along the commerce and trade realms. One of the major milestone deals struck between both parties was a \$3 billion agreement in 2018 under which Serbia would benefit from the construction of several industrial premises and infrastructures such as roads, bridges and railways, added to other major investments around its mining and military industries.⁶³ Serbia's increased engagement with Beijing, to the disadvantage of the EU, could be attributed to the perception that China does not condition economic investments on political demands⁶⁴ –

⁵⁸ 2008. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Jianchao's Remarks on Kosovo's Unilateral Declaration of Independence. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, [online] 18 February. Available at: <<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/fyrth/t408032.htm>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁵⁹ Beck, L. 2008. China "deeply concerned" over Kosovo independence. *Reuters*, [online] 18 February. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia-china/china-deeply-concerned-over-kosovo-independence-idU5TP34030820080218>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁶⁰ 2009. China: Kosovo violates international law. *B92*, [online] 7 December. Available at: <https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2009&mm=12&dd=07&nav_id=63568> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁶¹ 2019. Ambasadorica Kine: Pitanje Kosova rešiti u okvirima Rezolucije 1244. *N1 Info*, [online] 25 August. Available at: <<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a510342/Ambasadorica-Kine-o-Kosovu-i-ulaganjima-u-Srbiju.html>> [Accessed 6 August 2020].

⁶² Hammond, J. 2020. China on the Sideline as Japan Plays Bigger Role in Kosovo. *The Diplomat*, [online] 19 May. Available at: <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/china-on-the-sideline-as-japan-plays-bigger-role-in-kosovo/>> [Accessed 14 August 2020].

⁶³ Živanović, M. 2018. \$3bn Economic Agreements Boost China's Role in Serbia. *Balkan Insight*, [online] 18 September. Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/18/new-agreements-boost-china-role-in-serbia-09-18-2018/>> [Accessed 7 August 2020].

⁶⁴ Öztürk, T. 2019. Serbia sees China ties as way to catch up with Europe. *Anadolu Agency*, [online] 30 November. Available at: <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-sees-china-ties-as-way-to-catch-up-with-europe/1659699>> [Accessed 7 August 2020].

something that has garnered support among the Serbian public,⁶⁵ not least in the light of China's delivery of aid and resources in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.⁶⁶

Albeit lacking to a major extent Russia's historical-cultural ties, China's partnership with Serbia seems to build upon a broader tactic of growing economic leverage into Europe. Taking into account the common ideological traits that underlie Beijing and Belgrade's bilateral relations, mostly based on the essential nature of sovereignty and respect for territorial integrity, Serbia has found in China a novel trade sponsor that is helping reduce its commercial dependency on European providers – diminishing, thus, the extent to which it can be held politically accountable by its Western partners.

3. A discussion on the future of the dialogue

Against a backdrop of turbulent political developments, power shifts and consolidation, strained bilateral relations and competing external narratives, several critical points about the future of the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue have inevitably arisen. Many are the questions the involved stakeholders will have to consider in future negotiations if the dialogue process, in the terms we know it today, is to yield an acceptable outcome towards the full normalization of relations.

i. Political expectations and technical asymmetries ahead of September 7th

While it seemed that Washington's setback was irreversible and that the EU was unequivocally reinforcing its role as the foremost mediator, the Trump administration was ready to strike back in an effort to amend the failed June 27th meeting attempt. US Special Representative Grenell announced that September 2nd would be the chosen date for Kosovo's and Serbia's delegations to finally meet at the White House, later changed to September 4th.⁶⁷ Albeit enveloped in secrecy, the high-level meeting yielded a series of economic pledges of rapprochement, as well as a surprising diplomatic nod to Israel – Kosovo would initiate the establishment of relations with the Middle Eastern country, while Serbia committed to moving its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.⁶⁸

Now, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti are set to meet in Brussels on September 7th, alongside their teams, for what will be the second round of the dialogue since its resumption in July. After both delegations' encounter at the US-sponsored negotiating table three days before, these talks are expected to tackle the more political aspects of a potential final settlement. While not many technicalities have been made public, one of Belgrade's main points to address will expectedly be the implementation of the 2013 agreement on the creation of the Association of Serb Municipalities,⁶⁹ a demand that will in all likelihood be met with reservations from the Kosovo delegation inasmuch as said agreement was deemed unconstitutional by the country's Constitutional Court. Another topic addressed could be the controversial construction of the new Deçan-Plav road, connecting Kosovo and Montenegro, which has been suspended following suspicions that it was taking place in the protected area around the Serbian-run Visoki Dečani monastery, against the Law on Special Protected Areas.⁷⁰ Kosovo's key

⁶⁵ 2020. Stavovi građana Srbije prema Rusiji. *Institut za evropske poslove*, Research no. 21. Belgrade.

⁶⁶ Živanović, M. 2020. Vučić za RSE: Čekam predlog za Kosovo. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, [online] 7 June. Available at: <<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-kosovo-srbija-dijalog-eu-kina-rusija/30657562.html>> [Accessed 7 August 2020].

⁶⁷ 2020. Takimi Hoti-Vučiq në Shtëpinë e Bardhë shtyhet për 4 shtator. *Radio Evropa e Lirë*, [online] 22 August. Available at: <<https://www.evropaelire.org/a/30797487.html>> [Accessed 24 August 2020].

⁶⁸ 2020. Šta piše u sporazumu Kosova i Srbije? *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, [online] 4 September. Available at: <<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30821548.html>> [Accessed 5 September 2020].

⁶⁹ 2020. Vučić: U nastavku dijaloga 7. septembra tražiću ispunjenje ugovora o ZSO. *Beta*, [online] 7 August. Available at: <<https://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-srbija/131616-vucic-u-nastavku-dijaloga-7-septembra-trazicu-ispunjenje-ugovora-o-zso>> [Accessed 21 August 2020].

⁷⁰ Bami, Xh. and Qamili, A., 2020. Government suspends Decan to Plav road project. *Prishtina Insight*, [online] 19 August. Available at: <<https://prishtinainsight.com/government-suspends-decan-to-plav-road-project/>> [Accessed 21 August 2020].

demands to address will most likely be the issues of missing and displaced persons, war reparations and pensions. These topics will simultaneously be accompanied by the demand for an agreement that involves mutual recognition, which has constantly been repeated by Prime Minister Hoti⁷¹. Kosovo will demand a solution that does not affect its territorial integrity or its constitutional framework, two principles which Hoti has declared he will not put in jeopardy. Other aspects discussed might be the requests for more technical agreements to be implemented.

A remarkable aspect underlying the future unfolding of the talks, which is bound to highlight the uneven political nature of the process, is the observable asymmetry between the negotiating teams from Prishtina and Belgrade – a faithful representation of the state of governance in both countries. On the one hand, Serbia comes from holding a parliamentary election where Vučić's SNS has won by a landslide, effectively eliminating opposition representation at the National Assembly and consolidating the party's grip on power. Vučić's concentration of political control and authority, notwithstanding his position as president, has allowed for him to take over all competencies regarding the official representation of Serbia in the dialogue with Prishtina. On the other hand, Kosovo's current LDK-led government departs from a very weak position after its success at the no-confidence vote, which many among the wider public consider illegitimate. Furthermore, the perception that Prime Minister Hoti lacks the political experience to lead the Kosovo delegation adds up to the feeling of instability his government, which holds an extremely tight majority in parliament, currently conveys. Taking into consideration the traditional fragility and volatility of Kosovo's governments over the years, the Hoti administration runs a high risk of collapsing.

The state of domestic politics, of course, directly affects the course of the dialogue and plays a big role in the stability, consistency and internal coherence of the countries' delegations. While Serbia's representation, given the uncontested supremacy of Vučić and the SNS throughout the years, has routinely included, among others, the president himself, Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić and the director of Serbia's Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Đurić,^{72:73} Kosovo's delegation has been heterogeneous and highly impacted by domestic developments. The political instability in Kosovo has caused changes in the country's negotiating teams even at the expert level – since 2011, five different governments have alternated in and out of power. Throughout this period, only President Hashim Thaçi has been constantly engaged in the dialogue, yet for certain periods the delegation was led by former Prime Minister Isa Mustafa. Despite Thaçi's regular involvement since the beginning, the governing coalitions were often divided in the goals and views towards the dialogue. The dynamics of the talks were impacted by the appetites of even smaller parties that were part of the ruling coalition, and the fragility of the governments, added to the lack of state strategy and unification, has produced inexperienced and incompetent delegations. An example of this inherent institutional weakness can be found in the 2019 Constitutional Court's verdict⁷⁴ that declared the Kosovo delegation as unconstitutional, arguing that the team overlapped the competences stipulated in the Constitution: “the representation of foreign policy is the responsibility of constitutional institutions of the Republic of Kosovo”, it stated, adding that the

⁷¹ 2020. Hoti prezanton kornizen e dialogut Kosove-Serbi. *Radio Evropa e Lire*, [online] 10 August. Available at: <<https://www.evropaelire.org/a/30663302.html>> [Accessed 21 August 2020].

⁷² 2013. Sutra nastavak dijaloga, delegacija Srbije putuje u Brisel. *RTV*, [online] 18 April. Available at: <http://www.rtv.rs/sk/politika/sutra-nastavak-dijaloga-delegacija-srbije-putuje-u-brisel_386277.html> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

⁷³ 2020. Druga runda dijaloga na ekspertskom nivou: Delegacije Beograda i Prištine sastaju se u Briselu. *KosSev*, [online] 30 July. Available at: <<https://kossev.info/druga-runda-dijaloga-na-ekspertskom-nivou-delegacije-beograda-i-pristine-sastaju-se-u-briselu/>> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

⁷⁴ 2019. Kosovo Court declares negotiation team 'unconstitutional'. *Balkan Insight*, [online] 27 June. Available at: <<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/27/kosovo-court-declares-serbian-negotiation-team-unconstitutional/>> [Accessed 20 August 2020].

powers to reach international agreements could not be transferred to special mechanisms.⁷⁵ The state delegation was composed of eleven members from governing coalition parties and one opposition party. Former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, head of government at that time, delegated its competences to the state delegation on the dialogue.

Sequences and episodes of this sort have characterized the nature of Kosovo's delegations throughout the years. Lately, Kosovo's negotiating team has been undermined by the indictments of the Special Prosecutor's Office in The Hague against President Thaçi in regard to war crimes allegations. Consequently, Kosovo's delegation once again faced unexpected changes that could impact the dialogue, providing room for further internal struggle among the parties in the current government coalition. Such a fluctuating political landscape has hardly contributed to the systematisation of a consolidated and experienced delegation.

In the light of this technical imbalance, and acknowledging what is at stake and the questions that will most likely be addressed, the chances for success following the September 7th meeting should be met with caution. The political process of the dialogue has been unpredictable, rendering it hard to foresee or construct any potential outcome, let alone any prospects for a final agreement. If something has been proved these years is that deadlines and tight schedules are often condemned to fail. The dialogue is now entangled in new competing dynamics, unlike in previous years, and the lack of coordination between the EU and the US is bound to negatively affect the entire process. However, in what concerns a potential deal, Washington's and Brussels' clashing narratives have yielded a more serious and in-depth engagement in the process, which might be considered a positive sign that an agreement could be somehow closer.⁷⁶

ii. A rhetorical battleground for Washington and Brussels

Since 2018, US involvement in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue has been all the more present. Washington's increased engagement was welcomed by Kosovo's political elites, yet shortly followed by an unexpected turn of events. The general course of action evidenced that the US was seeking to exercise its authority over the long-lasting conflicts in the Western Balkans and bring them to an end, an aspect around which Washington was explicit and based upon which its policies were directed towards one outcome – a peace deal between Kosovo and Serbia. Despite these efforts, the failed meeting scheduled for June 27th that was never celebrated stalled the swiftly-gained tempo of US-facilitated negotiations, pushing Washington to the back seat of the process and leaving more margin for the EU to restore the talks. The US quickly moved out of the spotlight, accepted the failure of a high-level meeting that did not take place and went on to support the EU-led resumption of negotiations. As US Special Representative Palmer stated, “we are focused on supporting the process led by the European Union, which should lead to an agreement between Serbia and Kosovo”.⁷⁷ This was seen as good news, particularly considering how transatlantic cooperation over the dialogue had touched rock bottom in the past year.

Support, too, by US Special Representative Grenell was especially surprising and indicated an interesting development, bearing in mind his implicit confrontation with EU counterparts and his speedy interference in the EU-led process. The reasons why may be difficult to deconstruct. Over time, however, Washington's approach seemed to shift again – stating that they would

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Pineau, E. and Cotton, J. 2020. Serbia-Kosovo peace deal is possible, Vucic says. *Reuters*, [online] 10 July. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia-france/serbia-kosovo-peace-deal-is-possible-vucic-says-idUSKBN24B1DQ>> [Accessed 24 August 2020].

⁷⁷ 2020. Palmer: Ideally, an agreement between Serbia and Kosovo should lead to recognition. *European Western Balkans*, [online] 6 August. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/08/06/palmer-ideally-an-agreement-between-serbia-and-kosovo-should-lead-to-recognition/>> [Accessed 21 August 2020].

oversee the economic aspects of the Belgrade-Prishtina relations, while the EU could take care of the political traits through the dialogue. Considering the difficulty of detaching the political and the economic fields, the US decision raised many eyebrows.

Washington's incentives for holding parallel talks are manifold and have often been accompanied by a series of different narratives – mutual recognition and economic cooperation as a way out of the conflict, however, have been a constant throughout its approach. Even more so ahead of the November presidential election in the US, the Trump administration could be pushing for the Belgrade-Prishtina process to come to an end as soon as possible. Notable scepticism has arisen inasmuch as, despite the prospects for a swift agreement, the US government would be more drawn towards a quick fix that would not necessarily imply the normalization of relations between the two sides.⁷⁸

Transatlantic cooperation reached a low level during this period. The parallel negotiations that are soon expected to start exemplifies the tense state of US-EU relations on this matter, easily applicable for the Western Balkan region in general. Two competing narratives have evolved over the last two years: on the one hand, the EU has highlighted the importance of solving all standing issues between Kosovo and Serbia without anticipating an outcome, reaffirming the importance that an agreement should inspire the normalization of relations. On the other hand, the US envisions a fast deal involving mutual recognition as a desirable and viable result, setting clear deadlines and stressing that a deal is wanted before the year comes to an end. US rhetoric is explicit and often embroiled in economic-related affairs, rather than in political aspects, in their attempt to strike an agreement. At the same time, the EU has been excluded, sometimes even blamed, for not being able to deliver within its responsibility realm as the dialogue's overseer.⁷⁹

As high as the stakes are, the EU must step up its game in the dialogue if it wants to reap benefits. During the time that Brussels spent attempting to push for the resumption of the talks, to no avail, US lobbying had successfully managed to strike two letters of intent between Prishtina and Belgrade and a meeting between both presidents at the White House – not without ostensible meddling, over this process, in Kosovo's domestic affairs. Washington's sudden involvement seems to have acted as a true wake-up call for Brussels which, despite its ongoing identity crisis and its myriad dilemmas, needs to stand its ground and exercise its uncontested role as a mediator.

As an initial step for this to happen, the EU should urgently take into consideration a series of factors in order to enhance the dialogue's profitability, clean its image in the region and lead the talks down the most convenient road. First, through the development of a medium- and long-term strategy to counter the leverage and influence of major external actors that threaten the progress of the dialogue in its current terms – like the US, visibly more prone to strike a quick deal to maximize Trump's chances for reelection, or Russia, supportive of the status quo provided that Kosovo's recognition remains limited. Second, through the necessary reconsideration of the carrot-and-stick approach to the dialogue entailing 'enlargement as a prize', particularly in a context where the concept of enlargement is running out of momentum and is lacking the political eagerness to thrive. Last, through the establishment of a plan for the restoration of citizen

⁷⁸ 2020. Why a Kosovo-Serbia White House deal could be dangerous. *Brookings*, [online] 19 June. Available at: <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/19/why-a-kosovo-serbia-white-house-deal-could-be-dangerous/>> [Accessed 21 August 2020].

⁷⁹ Fetahu. A. 2020. Sandwiched between two competing narratives - a lot of uncertainties in the process of the dialogue. *Group for Legal and Political Studies*. [online] 30 June. Available at: <<http://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/sandwiched-between-two-competing-narratives-a-lot-of-uncertainties-in-the-process-of-the-dialogue/>> [Accessed 21 August 2020].

credibility and trust on EU bodies and institutions, an extremely damaged aspect of Brussels' broader action scheme in Serbia, Kosovo and the Western Balkans.

Conclusions

Since its start in 2011, the level of political engagement within the dialogue on the comprehensive normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia has gone through ebb and flow, oftentimes amid episodes of institutional confrontation and aggressive rhetorics. The standstill that emerged after the Kosovo government's decision of imposing a 100 per cent trade tariff on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a measure of retaliation for Belgrade's diplomatic campaign against Kosovo's international recognition, led to the freezing of relations between both parties – a tense state of impasse the EU, as the main mediator, was unable to reverse. Over the twenty-month period of deadlock, Kosovo's and Serbia's presidents openly mulled over the idea of engaging in territory exchange, a potentially dangerous solution that was swiftly rejected by European authorities.

In Kosovo, the resumption of the dialogue in mid-2020 was triggered by Albin Kurti's government's removal from power and LDK's taking over, whereby both the tariffs and the reciprocity policies were dropped. From that moment on, the timid continuation of meetings has taken place between Brussels and Paris, albeit often via video conference, seemingly pushed by Washington's failed attempt at harmonizing both countries' stances. The EU and the US have been vying for the upper hand in the political process, initiating a symbolic fight between their two competing narratives and their two diverging sets of interests vis-à-vis Kosovo, Serbia and the wider Western Balkan region. In the meantime, Russia and China remain as loyal partners to Serbia, albeit out of the dialogue per se – a comparative advantage that provides Belgrade with a back-up partnership plan should it gradually fall out with the West.

The second round of the dialogue, after its recent resumption, is set to take place in Brussels on September 7th under the auspices of the EU. While a few topics are expected to be addressed, the potential outcomes are to be considered with caution. The negotiations are turning a new page and, as such, both Kosovo and Serbia will have to remain wary, attempt to reach common ground and gear up for a final, acceptable and responsible deal to be struck.

POLICY REPORTS

Policy Reports are lengthy papers which provide a tool/forum for the thorough and systematic analysis of important policy issues, designed to offer well informed scientific and policy-based solutions for significant public policy problems. In general, Policy Reports aim to present value-oriented arguments, propose specific solutions in public policy – whereby influencing the policy debate on a particular issue – through the use of evidence as a means to push forward the comprehensive and consistent arguments of our organization. In particular, they identify key policy issues through reliable methodology which helps explore the implications on the design/structure of a policy. Policy Reports are very analytical in nature; hence, they not only offer facts or provide a description of events but also evaluate policies to develop questions for analysis, to provide arguments in response to certain policy implications and to offer policy choices/solutions in a more comprehensive perspective. Policy Reports serve as a tool for influencing decision-making and calling to action the concerned groups/stakeholders.



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