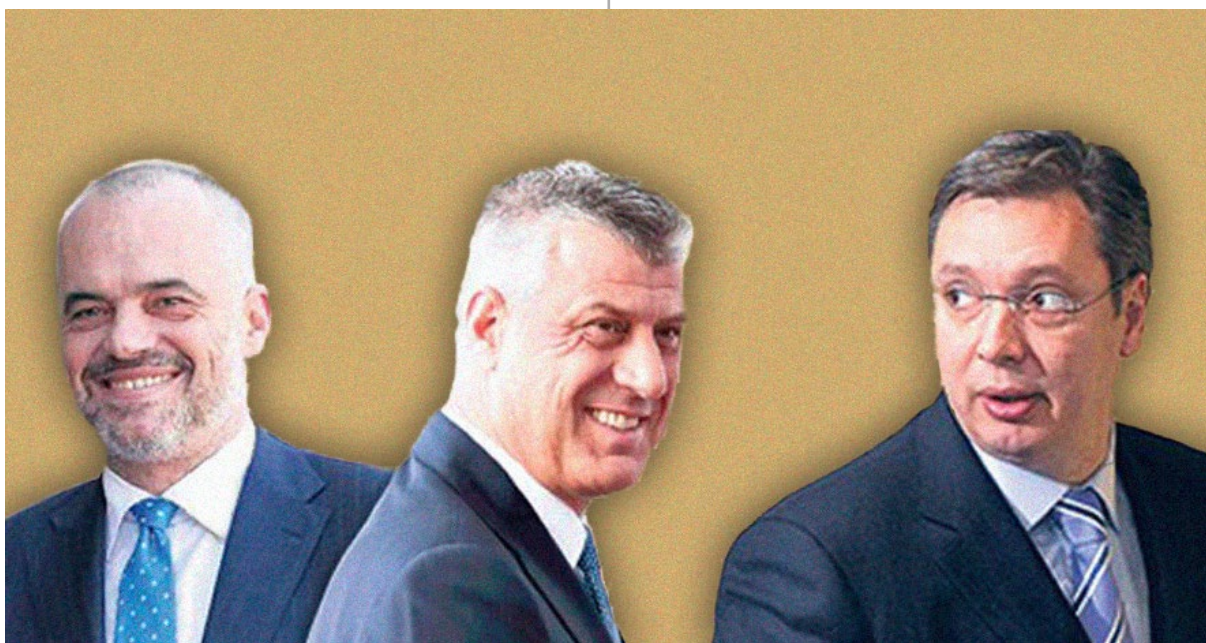


Helsinki bulletin



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THE SERBIAN-ALBANIAN QUESTION IN THE PRESENT-DAY CONTEXT

The purpose of the Brussels Agreement was to normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations. Its implementation, however, has been blocked, especially since January 2017 when this relationship started escalating in a negative direction. This radicalization and regress annulled practically all years-long efforts to bring Kosovo and Serbia closer to their declarative commitment – the membership of EU.

World disorder, the crisis of EU (now relaxed by Macron's victory in France) and the US's unpredictable foreign policy only further disorient ruling elites in the Western Balkans, caught in a

vicious circle of nationalism and poor capacity for taking a reformist plunge. Instead, they are themselves creating crises to stay in power. This is evident in ongoing crises in Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. Serbia's present regime has been keeping the society in crisis for five years now by campaigning non-stop against "foreign" and "domestic" enemies. The scope of the enemies it has identified is impressive: from always "guilty" Soros, through the US, the West, Vatican, Slovenia and Croatia to the Bosniaks and Albanians. Its "wiping boys" at home are the civil sector and its "foreign donors," the media,

the opposition and, naturally, all those daring to criticize the government.

The theses about the necessity to have borders in the Balkans revised – meaning a change in internationally recognized borders of Yugoslavia’s successor states along ethnic lines – are growingly given voice to in response to the situation in the region. Accordingly, multiethnic and multicultural solutions are seen as failures, while ethnically homogeneous states as the sole warrants of stability and obstacles to another conflict.

These theses coming from abroad fall on fertile soil and fuel delusion that a revision is still a possibility given that political elites in the Western Balkans lack capacity of their own to realize the project of ethnically pure states.

Over the past months the thesis about the Great Albania project has become a topic No. 1 in the region, especially in Belgrade. This comes not as a surprise given that it had been Belgrade that “advocated” the Great Albania with dedication in order to justify territorial ambitions of its own. Dobrica Ćosić, considered main national ideologist of the second half of the 20th century, was saying long ago that “the Albanians are entitled to unification but the Serbs too have this right.”

Belgrade’s reactions to the crises in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo laid bare Serbia’s policy to these countries. At the same time they show that Belgrade still hopes to realize (with Russia’s support) at least some of its goals (partition of Kosovo).

INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF GREAT ALBANIA

Both Kosovo and Albania are in political crises as evidenced in new elections that have been called and the outcome of which could considerably change political arenas in the two countries. In this context, national rhetoric is being used as a tool for winning over right-wing voters. So far the international community has reacted to the statements about Great Albania on several occasions but, as it turned out, there is neither political will nor power to have a project as such realized. Albanian Premier Edi Rama said that “small unions” would emerge in the region in the event of lost prospects for the membership of the EU.¹ His own preference is the EU, he said, as it unites the Albanians in the mother country and those in Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. He also warned against “nightmares” that would haunt the region should other powers continue suppressing the EU and its influence on the region, thus referring to Russia and Turkey in the first place.²

Most analysts in the West take the story about the Great Albania unrealistic. According to Frederick Wesley of the European Council for International Relations, the phantom of the Great Albania is something that pops up from time to time to be played on by Albanian leaders the same as by other politicians in the Western Balkans. They speak about it in public whenever it suits their political aspirations, referring to it either as an Albanian dream or, in the case of the Serbs and Macedonians, as a threat by Albanian nationalism.³ And yet, despite its emotional charge the very idea is not attractive to too many voters, he says.⁴

1 <http://www.dw.com/sr/velika-albanija-vi%C5%A1e-nije-tabu/a-38565632>.

2 Ibid.

3 <http://www.dw.com/sr/velika-albanija-prazna-ali-opasna-pri%C4%8Da/a-38707402>.

4 Ibid.

Prompted by Ramush Haradinai's release (he had been arrested in France at Serbia's warrant), as well as by William Walker's arrival in Kosovo saying that he was working on "the project that would unite all Albanians, those in Kosovo, in diaspora and in Albania proper alike," Belgrade not only aggravated its anyway bad relations with the Albanians but also undermine its relationship with the EU, France most of all. Among other things, it banned Serbian officials from traveling to France in the period of three months. "We shall not participate in meetings held in France for next three months. We simply have to protect our national interests," said Foreign Minister Dačić⁵

Walker's stay in Kosovo was seen as an occasion to raise anew the question of the Račak massacre (1999), the report by forensic expert Helene Rante and NATO intervention. Everything Serbia's officials said on the issue were mere fabrications and in line with the revision of developments taking place before the intervention. The media claimed that Walker "got an order from his bosses to fabricate an excuse for the aggression against the SRY."⁶ Namely, the Serbia side keeps claiming that Račak was a frame-up and a trigger for the intervention. In this context, the media manipulated with Rante's statements; from the very beginning she argued, quite opposite to Serbia's claims, that the massacre was committed against civilians who had not been killed in a cross-fire.⁷

The media called statements by Albanian officials in both Albania and Kosovo "an ongoing Albanian offensive in the Balkans," staged with tacit approval of American ambassadors in the region, as well as of NATO and the EU. The news about Madeleine Albright and Marti Ahtisaari's engagement as members of the Kosovo team

5 <http://rs.n1info.com/a245708/Vesti/Vesti/Bez-putovanja-u-Francusku-kao-zastita-drzavnih-interesa.html>.

6 Pečat, May 12, 2017.

7 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/1332376.html>.

in the Brussels negotiations was interpreted as a pressure on Serbia to recognize at long last Kosovo's membership of the UN.⁸

In Belgrade's interpretation, all this, taken together, possibly announces a war, the Albanians would start, and this is why Serbia has to strengthen its capacity for defense; and, Russia and China are Serbia's only true allies. Minister Dačić seized the opportunity to call for resolution of the status question of the Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš, saying he would initiate diplomatic immunity for its employees. The problem must be solved, he said, otherwise the Center will be closed down. Serbia should mind about its interests and, therefore, make an agreement with Russia the more so since it has already signed such bilateral agreements with other countries, he said.⁹

American officials warned Serbia about their distrust in Russia's plans for the Niš center and advised caution. The US wonders why is it that Russia tries to set up a humanitarian Center in Niš and asks for a special status for this institution, Hoyt Brian Yee of the US Department of State stressed out. "We do not think its intentions are good. "This is why we advised Serbia to raise difficult questions about the reasons behind this institution and a special status for it, and ask what it is they plan to do there that is not already being done by similar institutions in Belgrade."¹⁰

Orchestrated hysteria over the "Great Albania" laid bare Serbia's attitude towards the Albanians in general. Its fake readiness for dialogue was the result of the pressure from the EU and the benefits Serbia has been getting from it. In fact,

8 Pečat, May 12, 2017.

9 <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2723370/dacic-resiti-status-ruskog-centra-unisu-ili-ga-ugasiti.html>.

10 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/state-department-rusija-balkan/28494714.html>.

the Brussels Agreement was nothing but smoke screen that dispersed the moment the crisis became deeper.

Deep-rooted prejudice is still predominant at both sides. A research conducted by Srećko Mihajlović in the late 1990s showed that 55% of Serbs thought the Albanians hated other nations, 46% saw them as treacherous and 37% as backward.¹¹ This stereotype about the Albanians has not changed in the meantime; it was only further embedded by the thesis about the Albanians being “criminals and drug dealers” while Kosovo was a terrorist state like ISIL. Belgrade is the more so frustrated by the fact that the West intervened on the Albanians behalf in 1999.

THE FUTURE OF THE SERBIAN-ALBANIAN DIALOGUE

Political developments in Kosovo and in Serbia postponed the dialogue. Some analysts argue that it will not be renewed soon, except for possible meeting between certain leaders. Naim Rashiti who is well-informed about the situation in Kosovo says that the dialogue cannot possibly be renewed at this point given that President-elect Vučić has not decided yet on a nominee for premiership. Besides, there is no telling whether he will call new elections or nominate a candidate on his own. Kosovo will also going to get a new premier after the early elections on June 11, he says.¹²

European officials say the statements by both sides are unconstructive and could backfire on the actors.¹³

According to recent opinion poll conducted by the Institute for International Studies in Tirana, only 9% of citizens of Albania see unification with Kosovo as something good. Albert Rakipi, the director of the Institute, takes that an enterprise as such would be risky since both states are weak and Kosovo in even unconsolidated. Political conflicts are shaking both sides, both sides are dysfunctional and have low democratic standards, he says. Should they unite what would emerge would be a bigger but a very weak state impossible to govern, he says.¹⁴

The regular, quarterly session of the UNSC on Kosovo concluded that the latest developments had undermined the necessary level of trust between Belgrade and Prishtina, actually by the statements given by officials from both sides. Vlora Citaku, Kosovo’s Ambassador to UN, said neither ‘Great Kosovo’ nor ‘Great Albania’ was there to be seen but just the Albanians whose goal is to become EU citizens.¹⁵

Serbia’s Justice Minister Nela Kuburović seized the occasion of the SC meeting to utter most radical stands about Kosovo Belgrade had launched over the past months. Among other things she said that Prishtina was using the dialogue on normalization to blackmail Belgrade and European partners, and that no progress had been made in the establishment of the community of Serbian municipalities although that was “the most important provision of the First Agreement on Normalization.” She also criticized the decision by the French judiciary (on Haradinai’s release) calling it “shameful and scandalous, “a victory of crime” and “a defeat of the law and justice.”¹⁶ Everything started from Kosovo, she stressed out, “from the lies

11 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/post-scriptum-srpsko-albanski-odnosi/28493693.html>.

12 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-kosovo-dijalog/28497813.html>.

13 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/post-scriptum-srpsko-albanski-odnosi/28493693.html>.

14 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/post-scriptum-srpsko-albanski-odnosi/28493693.html>.

15 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sjednica-sbun-kosovu/28491964.html>.

16 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sjednica-sbun-kosovu/28491964.html>.

promoted by people like William Walker who even tries not to hide his Great Albania ambition and projects.”¹⁷

RUSSIA AND THE PRESENT CRISIS IN THE SERBIAN-ALBANIAN RELATIONSHIP

Russia’s growing presence in the region in the vacuum the US and EU left with their inadequate presence weakened the influence of the latter on local leaders. It was only the crisis in Macedonia and the attempted putsch in Montenegro that made the US return to the Balkans. Some US officials are aware that their engagement in the Balkans is of crucial importance; otherwise China and Russia would take their place.

Russia has been skillfully using the present crisis which is places in the context of its relations with NATO and the US. Moscow takes supporters of the idea about Great Albania are no secret,

and that Rama and Thaci are undermining regional stability “under NATO umbrella.”¹⁸

Hoyt Brian Yee war warned about Russia’s growing influence on politics in the Balkans, and its support to secessionism of Republika Srpska. Ethnically-based tensions have been growing again, he said, adding that the recent violence in Macedonia underlines the seriousness of the country’s political problems. Given that progress in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue has been stalled off, stability in the Balkans will remain vulnerable, while in the absence of imperative structural reforms Bosnia-Herzegovina risks to be a failure, he reminded.

Kremlin’s work on destabilization of the situation will not go unnoticed, said Democrat Senator Gregory Mix, adding he was afraid should the US consciously ignore or even, like some, support such attitude there would leave dangerous consequences on the region but on the US alike. “Therefore, we must not turn our back on the Balkans.”¹⁹

17 Ibid.

18 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/post-scriptum-srpsko-albanski-odnosi/28493693.html>.

19 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/state-department-rusija-balkan/28494714.html>.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Serbs and Albanians have a common chapter in history in their resistance to the Ottoman Empire. The process of establishment of nation-states in the Balkans began after the Berlin Congress in 1878. Considering the ethnically-mixed population of the Balkan Peninsula the projects for greater states collided in the same territories. The Serbs and Albanians collided in Kosovo where the Albanians had been in majority for long time. Throughout the 20th century Serbia was to brutally trying to subjugate the Albanians, which left the latter deeply traumatized. Serbia is frustrated with its failure to attain its national goal and its internationally recognized borders are hard to take.

Russia's growing presence and the constant threat of the refugee crisis made the US, the EU and NATO to seriously reconsider their engagement in the Balkans in a larger security context.

Political elites on both sides are blocking not only normalization of bilateral relations but also democratization of their own societies.

Though declaratively opting for the EU Serbia actually has neither foreign nor domestic policy to guarantee democratization and normalization of regional relations. Its relationship with Yugoslavia's successor-states is notably problematic.

The international community should shun from the thesis about partitions along ethnic lines under the pretext that peoples in the Balkans cannot live side by side. The fact is that the Balkans is a mixture of nations and that any resolution should imply a community of Balkan nations.

Apart from supporting Serbia's Premier and his cabinet the international community should assist its civil sector and the media so as that the country reaches politically critical mass for democratization from the grassroots.

Historical distrust is deep-rooted and calls for well-thought-out strategies, especially for education of the younger generations that would produce the elites capable of normalization and coexistence.