

# Helsinki *bulletin*



**HELSINKI COMMITTEE  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA**  
address: Kneza Miloša 4,  
Belgrade, Serbia  
tel/fax. +381-11-3349-170; 3349-167;  
e-mail: [office@helsinki.org.rs](mailto:office@helsinki.org.rs)  
<http://www.helsinki.org.rs>

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Sergej Lavrov i Aleksandar Vučić, 2017.

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## WAITING FOR VUČIĆ'S DECISION

In the midst of today's global turmoil when "old" and new big power are trying to position themselves through presence and influence as favorably as possible, the Balkans has (once again) become a point where their competing interests clash more and more brutally. Russia with its renewed ambition to curb or slow down Balkan countries' accession to the European Union and especially NATO with the helping hand from its so-called traditional allies has stepped into the region the EU and US, preoccupied with problems of their own, had neglected over past couple of years.

China has also come considerably closer to the region as well. Intent to infiltrate into the EU inasmuch as possible this growing global power with huge financial resources offers impoverished Balkan states attractive and much needed infrastructural projects – railways, motorways, channels, etc. Another major actor joining the race – though not so transparently – is Turkey that has aggravated its relationship with the EU – it once had an eye on membership of - over past years

Aware of Russia's infiltration in the Balkans the EU and US returned to the region with more seriousness. The EU offered a comprehensive strategy for its enlargement in the Western Balkans fully conscious that less demanding players are melting down its mobilizing power. In 2017 the Western community prevented an attempted putsch in Montenegro which soon joined NATO as its 28th member-state. And, thanks to the involvement of the US administration Macedonia's longstanding political crisis ended up in a constitutional and democratic manner. The Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia headed by Zoran Zaev now tries to speedily clear the way to the country's Euro-Atlantic membership (though stuck in the dispute with Greece over the name for the country ever since its independence).

"Strategic partnership" with Serbia signed in 2008 is the foothold of Russia's policy for the region. Serbia put its signature under this agreement that barely suits it mostly because of Russia's support for the status of Kosovo. Russia's position in this matter is clear-cut: it is standing by the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity rather than by Serbia as a state.

The agreement was also based on a partnership in the sphere of energy supply. As obstruction from the West turned this provision null and void, Russia strengthened its influence through soft power in practically all domains. Besides Serbia it is strongly present in Republika Srpska (Bosnia-Herzegovina), especially through its intelligence service.

If seriously opted for a course towards Europe Serbia knows too well that the deadline for resolving the Kosovo knot is expires pretty soon. In other words, "the comprehensive agreement on normalization between Belgrade and Prishtina" as the first step towards this goal has to be signed this year or in 2019 at the latest. That is a taciturn but precisely defined precondition for a

speedier process of accession to the EU: of course, if Belgrade is truly eager to accept Brussels' offer for a full-fledged membership by 2015.

If it decides to maintain the status quo – a frozen conflict for an indefinite period – Belgrade will close the door to its European prospects.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, its signature under a normalization agreement would testify that it has given up its wavering and unreliable foreign policy of keeping a foot in both camps.

The social climate on the eve of making a final decision on Kosovo is marked by a number of incidents that are always followed by brutal rhetoric, which undermines the Brussels dialogue and threatens regional stability. The most dramatic incident was the arrest of Marko Đurić, the head of the Kosovo Office, and his expulsion from Kosovo. Vučić's commenting on the incident as "a senseless attack by a gang of terrorists with the assistance from KFOR and EULEX"<sup>2</sup> and that of many media outlets in Serbia practically grew into a farce and as such undermined his international credibility – and of his regime generally.

Vučić was for several days in visit to New York just before the incident. Apart from a brief meeting with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres the Serbian President met with several important interlocutors, at least according to the media. What the latter messaged to him can be summed up in his comment sent to Serbia from New York: "To the West, Kosovo is an old story."<sup>3</sup> This was what probably added to general

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- 1 "Within its present border Serbia could never join the EU, and Brussels and Berlin would never accept it as an equal partner," warned Russian expert in the Balkans Sergey Bondarenko to whom the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans is nothing but „another carrot on a stick." In his view, Belgrade should stick to its present position of having good relations with Brussels and Moscow alike. *Politika*, March 12, 2018.
  - 2 *Danas*, March 27, 2018.
  - 3 *Politika*, March 20, 2018.

neurosis (in Prishtina too, in a way) and provoked foolish steps and accompanying barely appropriate rhetoric. And yet, once all was said and done came the conclusion that negotiations would be continued in the search for a peaceful solution. There is no telling for the time being in “what way and in what form” this will be accomplished.<sup>4</sup>

## DEVELOPMENTS ARE RAISING THE TEMPO

Early in 2018 Belgrade-Prishtina negotiations resumed first at the level of work groups and then between the two Presidents, Vučić and Thaci<sup>5</sup>, ended in a failure because neither of the two sides got what it had been after: Serbia, guarantees for the establishment of the community of Serbian municipalities /ZSO<sup>6</sup>, while Kosovo, an agreement on energy supply. Mutual disappointment culminated in the so-called Mitrovica incident: although, as generally agreed on, it was (again) all about a show the two sides had staged in tandem.<sup>7</sup> Probably something much more serious was taking place behind the curtain of this “incident:” something announcing that Kosovo North would be placed under Prishtina’s control pretty soon and that nothing would come out of Belgrade’s plan for partition of Kosovo (a goal practically all of Belgrade’s governments have been aspiring to).<sup>8</sup>

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4 Press release following Vučić’s meeting with Federica Mogerini in Belgrade, Politika, March 28, 2018.

5 Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaci met in Brussels on March 23, 2018.

6 Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said he would suggest to Vučić to withdraw (his) signature under the Brussels Agreement, Politika, March 25, 2018.

7 Belgrade-seated portal „Pravda” publicized the news about Đurić’s arrest five hours before it actually happened.

8 During his latest meeting with representatives of the Western community Vučić was most probably let know that partition of Kosovo was out of question.

Almost simultaneously three of Kosovo’s top-notch political players – President Thaci, Premier Haradinai and parliamentary speaker Vellseli – announced that they had agreed to have a statute of a future Serbian community assembling ten municipalities with Serbian majority population drafted. A backlash from the Serbian side ensued: those ten municipalities would form the community on their own, on April 10, the anniversary of the Brussels Agreement.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime Vučić softened the said decision by saying that a scenario as such would take place should the government in Prishtina fail to keep its promise about the community.

Raised tensions between Belgrade and Prishtina prompted international players to take some action – from Federica Mogerini who dropped by a day after the incident in Mitrovica to American envoy for Europe and Eurasia Wess Mitchell and Turkish President Taip Erdogan. Mogerini’s visit to Belgrade only and not to Prishtina Vučić interpreted as Brussels siding by Belgrade. Serbian MP and former official of the Democratic Party Goran Bogdanović denied this statement by wondering how come Mogerini had not gone to Prishtina to tell Thaci and Haradinai something like this should never happen again. “The purpose of her visit to Belgrade is quite obvious,” he said.<sup>10</sup> A statement by Premier Ana Brnabić leads to the same conclusion; she said she had never before seen President Vučić so disappointed with a stance taken by the Western community.<sup>11</sup>

Some interpreted Vučić’s turning to Russian President Putin for “opinion and advice how to counterbalance Prishtina’s violence and aggression” given that “Albanians are largely supported by many Western countries” as Belgrade’s attempt to make Russia take part in settlement

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9 This was released after the Mitrovica incident when Serbian ministers walked out of the Kosovo cabinet.

10 Blic, April 1, 2018.

11 Politika, April 2, 2018.

of the Kosovo crisis.<sup>12</sup> Putin told him that “Serbia is Russia’s key partner in the Balkans” and that he was aware of “the pressure put on Vučić and Serbia;” and accordingly, he would be “taking further measures and responding promptly.”<sup>13</sup>

## ACHIEVEMENT OF “INNER DIALOGUE”

Aware that final decision on Kosovo was closing in, in the second half of 2017 President Vučić initiated the so-called inner dialogue. Supposedly, the outcome of the dialogue would help him to formulate his own platform to be announced by the end of April or in early May.

The debate on the issue the Office for Kosovo organized for academic and expert circles did not proceed towards “a rational solution.”<sup>14</sup> Vučić himself confirmed this at a meeting with representatives of Serbia’s civil sector. He said that the majority of participant in the dialogue had spoken in favor of a status quo (a frozen conflict), which was something he did not agree with. “Unlike others I care more about human lives that territories and that’s why future of the entire Serbia will depend on actions we take in next six months, a year or two.”<sup>15</sup>

The obvious dichotomy between the President and his officials leads some analysts to conclude all this might be a strategic approach. “No one else from state leaderships has ever echoed or acted according to these principles to President Vučić’s repeated public statement about the necessity of serious and rational negotiations with

Kosovo Albanians, devoid of empty words and political marketing.”<sup>16</sup>

In the inner dialogue NGO activists assembled in the National Convention on the European Union were the only encouragement for “a difficult decision” (should Vučić opt for making it). They stressed the imperative of the safeguard of regional peace and security. “Building of a lasting peace implies establishment of the rule of law,” while a resolution (of the Kosovo question) “should be searched for according to international context, real benefits for and costs to be paid by citizens of Serbia, and in cooperation with the international community, the EU above all, and through a compromise with institutions in Kosovo.”<sup>17</sup>

## ALLIED RIGHTISTS

Most opposition parties had refused to take part in the “inner dialogue” even before its format was publicly announced (this mostly refers to Democratic, New, Social Democratic and People’s parties, the Movement of Free Citizens and “Enough is enough,” which considers itself pro-European). Though most of these parties share the stance prevalent in the dialogue (status quo), they are intentionally leaving Vučić “in the lurch:” to make the decision on his own, while hoping against hope that marginalized as they are they would become politically stronger once he “sells” or “betrays” Kosovo.

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12 Politika March 28, 2018.

13 Ibid.

14 Organizovani dijalog o rešavanju kosovskog pitanja, analitički je pratio Forum za etničke odnose <http://fer.org.rs/>

15 Politika, 1. april 20

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16 Dragiša Mijačić, the director of the Institute for Territorial Economic Development, says that as the dialogue is nearing its end, „the government’s Kosovo storm troopers - Ivica Dačić, Aleksandar Vulin and Marko Đurić – are spicing Serbia’s political scene with their statements that barely help the society to reach a consensus on any of the solutions placed at the agenda,” Vreme, March 8, 2018.

17 Ibid.

The Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ remained consequent in the stands advocated by its former leader Vojislav Koštunica, the same one who had staged protests and church procession against Kosovo's independence declaration. The Party's Political Committee (headed by historian Miloš Ković) publicized "The Appeal for Defense of Kosovo and Metohija," in January 2018. In three days only 4,600 citizens of Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska<sup>18</sup> put their signatures under it; the figure soon spiraled up to some 16,000 signatories, including 12 SPC bishops, 14 academicians and almost 400 university professors and scholars.<sup>19</sup> They appealed for the respect for the Constitution and the pledge on "the Holy Bible" while demanding Serbia's topnotch politicians not to sign "a legally binding agreement on a comprehensive normalization between Belgrade and Prishtina," allow the territory of Kosovo and Metohija to be a part of a "Greater Albania" "emerging before our eyes" or "grant Kosovo a seat in the UN."<sup>20</sup>

The Serbian Orthodox Church /SPC/ has not taken yet an official stance about the issue. Being conservative, it has always been against Kosovo's "surrender" to Albanians. Over the past couple of months Patriarch Irinej has been confusing his clergy and general public with his odes to Vučić. He has been insisting nevertheless that Kosovo has to be safeguard at all costs. The SPC has recently proposed that to have its name changed into the SPC-Peć Patriarchate, as well as to change titles of patriarchs of seashore lands all of which holds strong political, territorial, identity and national connotations. The church would change its name because of Kosovo while the Patriarch would have an addition to his title because of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and bishoprics in Croatia. A long list of bishoprics to be promoted to metropolitans includes among others bishoprics of Banjaluka,

Dalmatia, Zahumlje-Herzegovina and Raška-Prizren. Almost the entire diaspora in the close neighborhood (in ex-Yugoslav territory) would get the status of metropolitans. Zagreb and Sarajevo are already metropolitan seats.

The Liberal Democratic Party that has been totally marginalized is the only one that encourages Vučić for normalization of relations with Kosovo. At the other pole, the parties at the extremely rightist margins – the Serbian Radical Party and "Dveri" – are calling for the end of negotiations with Brussels and the country's movement towards Euro-Asian Union with Russia in its epicenter.

## RUSSIAN STANCE

Through its scholars, academicians, historians and experts in the Balkans such as Sergey Bondarenko or Alexander Dugin strongly present in Serbia's media sphere (and not only at the Russian portal "Sputnik") Russia has been supporting the advocates for the rightist option – for the safeguard of Kosovo "within Serbia's borders" – while appealing for strict respect for the UNSC Resolution 1244. However, the official Moscow leaves a definite decision on Kosovo to Belgrade.

On the eve of his visit to Serbia Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned against "Ukrainian scenario" claiming that by conditioning Serbia to choose between "Russia and the West" the EU is making the same mistake as in the case of Ukraine, which provoked the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>21</sup> Once in Belgrade he softened his statement by saying that his country supports "Serbia's independent course in several directions."<sup>22</sup> As tensions and pressure on Serbia from the West grow stronger Lavrov is using stronger and

18 Politika, March 26, 2018.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Danas, February 14, 2018.

22 Ibid. .



stronger language about the Balkans. In March 2018 he said, “Balkan countries should access preconditions for EU accession on their own,”<sup>23</sup> given that overt demands and ultimatums for a choice “for us” or “against us” are turning “the Balkans into yet another conflict frontline in Europe.”<sup>24</sup>

Various speculations are circulating – starting from the one that some lobbyists in the US are working on Kosovo’s partition behind the administration’s back, and advocating stances taken by Russian officials that an agreement on Serbia-Kosovo normalization would be detrimental to Belgrade given that a promise about a community of Serbian municipalities is nothing but “a knickknack”<sup>25</sup>

Back in 2007 Ahtisaari’s plan had envisaged a wide autonomy for the Serbian community and as such was incorporated into Kosovo Constitution. This leads to a conclusion that a community of Serbian municipalities is actually the only compromise solution Vučić has been referring to for long. It was a different interpretation of the status for the Serbian community that has

cut off the Brussels dialogue. Belgrade has been hoping for a partition till the eleventh hour; the Western community turned it down definitely. And that was what Vučić realized only during his last visit to the US.

Serbia is offered a speedier accession to the EU, access to its funds, foreign investments, etc. under the condition it accepts “a compromise solution.” Some domestic skeptics would not take it for granted and, therefore, suggest that Serbia should first accede the EU and only then begin working on settlement of the Kosovo question.<sup>26</sup>

There are also speculations that Belgrade and Moscow have agreed behind closed doors Moscow would veto Kosovo’s membership of the UN. This is what Ljiljana Smajlović puts across to the Serbian public while invoking the stories run by the media in Kosovo.<sup>27</sup> This is why the possibility for Kosovo’s status as an observer rather than a full-fledged member of the UN is being mentioned; the UN General Assembly decides on a country’s status as an observer by majority vote, while the UNSC on a full-fledged membership.<sup>28</sup>

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23 Politika, March 3, 2018.

24 Ibid.

25 Danas, March 22, 2018.

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26 Vreme, January 31, 2018.

27 Nedeljnik, March 8, 2018.

28 Newscaster, TV N1, March 31, 2018.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A legally binding agreement on Serbia-Kosovo normalization guarantees the Serbian community's better situation in security, economic and social sense. It also provides an opportunity for Kosovo's speedier democratic development in accordance with European principles for the respect of human rights and freedoms. The agreement opens avenues towards EU membership to Kosovo and Serbia alike.

A signature under the agreement obliges Belgrade to change its attitude towards Kosovo Serbs. In other words, it would have to give up its plan to "keep" the Serbs in North Kosovo only, where only one-third of total number of them in Kosovo lives (some 30,000 people). Kosovo's enclaves with majority of Kosovo Serbs have been marginalized and left to their own resources and to "obscure figures delegated to them" whenever it suits Belgrade's petty politics.<sup>1</sup>

The Serbian List, practically a branch office of the Serbian Progressive Party, holds a political monopoly on Kosovo North and is also predominant in enclaves. According to Kosovo Serb leading figures (such as Rada Trajković, Marko Jakšić, etc.) the so-called businessmen – controversial figures like Milan Radojičić<sup>2</sup> and Zvonko Veselinović – hold all informal power. The agreement on normalization should open the door to Serbian authentic leaders in Kosovo.

According to latest public opinion polls, 75 percent of Kosovo Serbs trust no politician whatsoever.<sup>3</sup> They say that no politician has showed any readiness to seriously cope with their everyday problems; the latter implies establishment of relevant cultural and educational institutions, urbanization of enclaves (social and architectural), interest-free loans for startup of small-sized enterprises, de-ghettoization of enclaves, etc. Establishment of a permanent dialogue between Serbian and Albanian communities, at local level and with Prishtina, is notably important.

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1 Vreme, March 22, 2018.

2 Commenting on recent incidents in Mitrovica, Kosovo Premier Haradinai confirmed that he has been in regular contact with him; Danas, April 3, 2018.

3 Newscaster, TV N1, April 1, 2018.