

# THE IMPACT OF SERBIA–KOSOVO RELATIONS ON SECURITY IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE: ONE OPINION FROM BELGRADE

By Dragan Djukanovic\*

## 1) Potential preservation of the status quo between Serbia and Kosovo – long-term staying in the jaws of the wartime past

Preserving the existing relations between Serbia and Kosovo on which primarily insisted political options on the right (including a significant part of the Serbian opposition gathered around the newly formed Union for Serbia), circles around the Serbian Orthodox Church and the "louder part" of the academic community, would only further alienate and separate the country from its European perspective and potential economic progress and consolidation. This was demonstrated by Serbia's internal dialogue on Kosovo. Thus, achieving the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, initiated by the negotiations in 2011, is of significant importance. It would improve the lives of citizens, consolidate the two societies and two economies, and speed up the European path of both Serbia and Kosovo. In fact, this means the deadline for Serbia's accession to the European Union, which was set at the beginning of this year for 2025, would merely be a dead letter without an essential compromise between Serbia and Kosovo.

Moreover, preserving the status quo, and not the wrongly used syntagma "frozen conflict", (there are no members of Serbian police, military or other forces in Kosovo.) primarily under the strong influence of the Russian Federation, while having unrealistic expectation for decades about the global changes and changes of the geostrategic position of the entire Balkan Peninsula, would represent a way for this country, Russia, to continue to exert great influence on Serbia, as well as on the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity Republika Srpska. In this view, Russia will surely obstruct any potential agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. The official Moscow understands that with this issue resolved, a major asset to making itself „attractive“ to Serbia and make of it its satellite state, will actually disappear. In fact, the whole plan to fully bind Serbia to Russia energy-wise, carried out during the last decade, was hidden behind the promised diplomatic Russian support for Serbia in the Kosovo issue, primarily, within the framework of the United Nations system. Of course, the actual capacities of this Russian

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\* Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia

support were not even close to the expectations of the then political elites in Serbia, but also did not serve the best interests of the country itself.

The long-term preservation of the status quo for Serbia would not represent the most favourable option given the demographic tendencies in Kosovo (primarily the fewer numbers of Serbian citizens), but also in the southern parts of Serbia. It would be advantageous primarily for the "multi-ethnic" criminal circles in Kosovo in avoiding the prevention of their numerous illegal activities. In fact, the lack of essential cooperation between the Ministry of Interior of Kosovo and the Ministry of the Interior of Serbia only contributes to the preservation of the existing situation. The cementing of the existing Belgrade-Pristina relations would not be favourable for either side because it would alienate Serbia and Kosovo from the European Union in terms of infrastructure, investment, energy and in any other way. That is why instruments of the European Union's influence on both sides are important. It will entice them to carry on with the dialogue and eventually to reach a compromise solution, but also to fully implement previous and future agreements.

When it comes to Serbia and Kosovo, the status quo would only deepen their mutual misunderstanding. However, it would also complicate the attempts of two societies (Serbian and Kosovo) and two peoples (Albanians and Serbs) to direct themselves towards the necessary mutual understanding and reconciliation. This would certainly affect the capacity of regional multilateral cooperation in which after 2012 Kosovo appeared as equal, but with special indications. The absence of compromise on full normalization and the continuation of the current difficult-to-maintain situation would also affect other parts of the Western Balkans region, and above all, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It would equally affect the implementation of the recent agreement between Greece and Macedonia (from 17 June 2018). It should additionally be noted that the full stability of the wider region of South-eastern Europe cannot be ensured without solving all these three important current Balkan issues.

## **2) Kosovo division – taken for granted, but a difficult solution to achieve**

In the Serbian public (parts of the political elite and the academic community), the issue of territorial rearrangement of Kosovo are frequently being discussed. The similar situation is with the Pristina authorities, which mention the potential "correction" of the Kosovo border so it includes Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (Presevo Valley). The idea that the north of Kosovo, which was part of Serbia's territorial reorganization in 1959, should now be integrated into the rest of Serbia, was also very common. This idea has had its continuity from the time of

Dobrica Cosic's plan in the mid-90s of the 20th century, that is, right before the outbreak of armed conflicts in Kosovo.

It should be noted that the United States and the European Union are certainly not in favour of this scenario because it could easily endanger the entire Yugoslav post-conflict area, which has been called the Western Balkans for almost two decades. Efforts to realize this scenario either through attempts to "extend" the territory of Kosovo or even "swap" the territory with the central parts of Serbia would only cause additional problems in the western parts of Macedonia. These problems would subsequently spread to the south and northeast of Montenegro, but also to Sandzak and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Ahtisaari Plan (Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, 2007) also insisted on preserving the borders of the former Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo immediately before the formal suspension of its autonomy, as of December 31, 1988. It should also be pointed out that in its conclusions of November 2005, the International Contact Group pointed out that the division of Kosovo was unacceptable. The Russian Federation agreed with that because in those years, it largely supported the Western mainstream regarding defining the final status of Kosovo.

Therefore, any new territorial organization of Kosovo, whether the announced "extension" to the southern parts of Serbia or the redefinition of the status of the northern predominantly Serbian Kosovo municipalities, could contribute to the strengthening of new radical political options primarily in Pristina, like the currently otherwise weakened Self-Determination movement. This would lead to inter-ethnic tensions in the already severely disturbed region of northern Kosovo and to wider regional instability.

On the other hand, nationalist circles in Serbia could additionally homogenize around this topic, with attempts to resolve this issue with the potential rebellion of local Serbs in the north or with the entry of Serbian security forces into the north of Kosovo. Of course, such plans are followed with the essential lack of understanding of the current security reality of Southeast Europe. However, such attitudes are only an echo of the previous way of thinking of leading representatives of the mainstream of the Serbian communists after 1987 and the nationalist elite in Serbia over the past decade. In fact, they never really understood the actual need for Kosovo's autonomy or had respect for its particularities and the collective rights of Kosovo Albanians.

That is why it is still extremely difficult for the prevailing part of the Serbian public to talk about facing the actual situation in Kosovo, especially after 1999 and 2008. Even today in

Serbia the problem with Kosovo is predominantly perceived as a territorial issue ("we will not give 13 percent of the territory") on the one hand, or as an opportunity for the definite demarcation of Serbian and ethnic Albanian territories in the Balkans through the division of this territory, on the other.

In accordance with its Constitution Act (2008), Kosovo is defined as a community of Albanians and other ethnic communities (Article 3 of the Constitution). However, it is obvious that apart from the rhetorical attempts to speak about multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity of Kosovo, representatives of the Albanian political elite have not demonstrated any essential attempts to integrate the Serbian community, but also the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. The results of the 2011 Census in Kosovo (excluding northern Serb municipalities) showed the prevalence of the ethnic Albanians (92.93%), but the current ethnic majoritarianism must be overcome by a new model of minority inclusion. However, the significant participation of the Serbs (1.47%) in Kosovo's political life if it comes to a division or separation of the four northern municipalities (Leposavic, Zvecan, Zubin Potok and North Kosovska Mitrovica) will not be possible, given their demographic inferiority in the central and southern parts of Kosovo and the fact that, after the Bosniaks, they represent the second non-Albanian community in terms of numbers.

Moreover, the Serbs would become a nation of marginal or accidental presence, which in fact does not correspond to their real historical heritage of Kosovo. Introducing the issue of "swap" of territory between Serbia and Kosovo would only further destabilize the south of Serbia, which is of immense importance for the country, since it is the land connection with neighbouring Macedonia via Corridor 10, as well as with the Greek Aegean coast.

Besides, given the ethnic diversity of Bujanovac and the neighbouring area, with its significant Serb and Roma populations in addition to the Albanians, the "swap of territory"/"correction of the Kosovo border" might be a starting point for new tensions, as well as for the potential inter-ethnic conflicts. Of course, the final position of the United States on this issue, i.e. the position of the current Trump administration, is very important. Any suggestion of a potential change in the so far relatively rigid US attitude regarding the territorial integrity of Kosovo could only make the entire process of finalizing the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo more difficult. It can also prolong it and significantly slow it down.

The sporadic support of certain circles in Russia for the division of Kosovo, which surfaced during the first half of 2018, could also lead to nurturing of otherwise ungrounded expectations by the authorities in Belgrade, and to hopes that this could really happen. Consequently, it can make the conclusion of a comprehensive legally binding agreement on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, as it was foreseen by the EU Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans until 2025 (February 6, 2018), completely uncertain in the short term.

Therefore, the potential change of the 1959 borders of Kosovo or the return to the borders until 1954 (when the Presevo Valley was part of Kosovo) would only produce additional instability primarily in the immediate environment (Sandzak and South Serbia), but also in Macedonia and some parts of Montenegro. However, based on several statements by representatives of the authorities in Belgrade, it seems that the impossibility of such a plan is recognized and that this initiative comes rather late. This is also due to the reasonably strong attitude of the Federal Republic of Germany regarding the change of boundaries.

On a wider European scale, the division of Kosovo would be a sound basis for recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea and recognition of the change of the Ukrainian borders. However, it would undoubtedly affect the situation in Georgia and Moldova as well. This would strengthen the Russian factor, and not only in that part of the post-Soviet space. The eventual division of Kosovo would have significant implications for wider stability in Southeast Europe, especially if it led to inter-entity tensions and new spirals of conflict. Despite the strengthened presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Western Balkans and in the Southeast of Europe, it seems difficult to prevent potential problems that might occur in the meantime.

It is also clear that the division of Kosovo in the way that is often debated by the Serbian public would additionally damage the interethnic relations. We still bear in mind that the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 was followed by the departure from northern Kosovo of, already small numbers, ethnic Albanians, but also members of other non-Serb communities. The Kosovo authorities and Albanian political leaders understand the strategic importance of the Ibar Kolašin, the southern slopes of Kopaonik and in particular, the immediate vicinity of Pančić's summit (alt. 2017 mt) to the position of the whole of Kosovo. Moreover, this part of Kosovo is rich in hydro potentials and in that sense, it is even more important to the Pristina political elite.

However, since the option of border change/territorial swap has not yet been ruled out by the presidents of Serbia and Kosovo or the US officials, this topic should be analysed in the light of the anticipated completion of the dialogue between the two sides. If we first manage to secure mutual agreement for this option, which implies a broader consensus within the Serbian and Kosovo societies, and secondly the EU and US consent, then it should be implemented exclusively in a peaceful manner.

### **3) The timid public announcement of a compromise between Serbia and Kosovo and its frequent stigmatization in the Serbian public**

The Kosovo problem, as the previous source of the Yugoslav crisis, which escalated in its most radical form ten years after large demonstrations in major Kosovo cities in 1981, is still one of the leading sources of instability in the Western Balkans, but also in Southeast Europe. It is apparent that Belgrade's decades-long attempts during the 20th century to fully integrate Kosovo into the political system of Serbia had not yielded significant results, and that the crisis escalated in 1998, especially in 1999. In this context, it is very important to point out that Serbia, formerly the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, did not have any state-legal relations with Kosovo after 1999. This was indicated by the unsuccessful agreement from Rambouillet (February 1999) within the institutional integration of Kosovo into the then two-member Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

Therefore, a completely new political, economic, security system had been formed in Kosovo, independently from Serbia/Yugoslavia/SCG. Since then, it has been a necessity for Serbia and Kosovo to establish such relations that would overcome their different approach to the status of Kosovo, but which would also enable both sides to relieve and tackle many tensions in Southeast Europe through the relaxation of their relations. Attempts to accomplish this over the past decade have failed. However, the seven years-long process of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, which started with the so-called technical issues, has now reached the point of necessity to conclude a comprehensive and legally binding determination of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

At this moment, a significant part of the Serbian public is not ready to look favourably on a potential deal with Kosovo. Moreover, it seems that the front of political parties and movements is united with the primary goal of preventing it. There is also the Serbian Orthodox

Church, which does not support a potential deal in any segment, and which in the regional context has problems not only with the Roman Catholic Church and the Islamic Community, but also with all the neighbouring Orthodox churches. An additional aggravating factor is the strengthened (para) political influence of Russia in Serbia, well cherished during the time of the former Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica (2004-2008). The absence of the desire for a compromise between Serbia and Kosovo is evident in the part of the academic community associated with the right-wing political heritage, and clerical and conservative orientations.

Any attempt to accept a compromise with Kosovo will be perceived in Serbia as a "betrayal", "surrender" or open political weakness from the above-mentioned circles. On the other hand, it is clear that the strategy of avoiding compromise by certain political circles is largely guided by the support of the official Moscow and recently, it seems, also by Beijing.

It should also be noted that more radical political circles in the political corpus of Kosovo Albanians are also not ready for a minimum agreement with Serbia. In this, they see a permanent threat to Kosovo's statehood proclaimed in 2008 and the unity of its territory. It seems the European Union does not work at full capacity to change such a situation and substantially converge the two sides despite the new stage in normalization of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo that began in July 2017 with the meeting of the two presidents. And the new incentives for this process since the end of June 2018 have not produced the expected results, although it is evident that the rhetoric of the authorities in Belgrade and Pristina is obviously becoming moderate.

However, it should be emphasized that some actors in both societies are interested in normalization and act towards it. These are primarily businessmen, whose cooperation can be assessed as good and well-institutionalized through the chambers of commerce and regional arrangements. Then, there are civil society organizations that through very agile non-governmental organizations and cultural, media and even scientific cooperation, create the basis for the normalization of mutual relations.

The space for compromise between Serbia and Kosovo is undoubtedly large and each agreement would also strengthen the European perspective of two sides. It is necessary to implement all agreements that have been signed since 2011, especially regarding the establishment of the Community of Serb Majority Municipalities (ZSO), but also energy agreements. In this sense, there is also the possibility that the two sides will approach each

other without a formal mutual recognition. This would lead to a significant improvement of the situation in the region of Southeast Europe, strengthening of regional cooperation, improvement of economic opportunities in the region and improvement of the standards of the citizens of Serbia and Kosovo. Kosovo's membership in international organizations should not be a significant problem in this process since the membership in these institutions is not the automatic confirmation of the recognition of its independence by Serbia.

The wider context of European integration is also an important basis for achieving a full compromise between Kosovo and Serbia. In this sense is also significant cooperation in the field of infrastructure projects, transport (air, road and rail), further trade liberalization and alignment of investment promotion policies, mutual recognition of diplomas and strengthening of cooperation within numerous existing forums for cooperation in Southeast Europe and in the Western Balkans. The already established cooperation between the chambers of commerce of Serbia and Kosovo opens the possibility for new incentives and business activities in the third markets, but also full use of the CEFTA 2006 capacities.

By a comprehensive legally binding agreement both sides could secure:

1. Significant facilitation of the movement of people, goods, services and capital between the two sides; overcoming possible customs barriers; encouraging investment by both parties and their full legal protection; mutual incentives for the development of road, air and rail transport between the two territories;
2. Cooperation in relation to the central authorities of the two sides and their competencies in the fields of economy, transport, energy, telecommunications, technology, infrastructure, education, culture, judiciary, health, social protection, environment, agriculture and tourism. This cooperation should be operationalized through the conclusion of a large number of bilateral agreements in these areas. It is especially important to conclude a cooperation agreement in the area of civil, criminal and administrative matters, as well as judicial cooperation.
3. That both sides should agree on the necessity of suppressing hostile propaganda against the other signatory, which would be carried out by individuals or organized groups. They could also oblige not to show hostility to one another or to take such potential actions that jeopardize peace, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. It is important to encourage the cooperation of the ministries of the interior in the field of combating terrorism, organized crime and corruption;



4. That both sides should remain resolved to a peaceful bilateral resolution of the remaining outstanding issues (issues of missing persons, the return of internally displaced persons, issues of the movable and immovable property of Serbia, the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo). The non-discriminatory status of resolving property issues of citizens and organizations of the two sides is indispensable;
5. The full potential of cooperation between local communities of Kosovo and Serbia, with the possibility of financing Serbian municipalities in accordance with the First Agreement on Normalization (2013), cooperation in the field of education, regarding the position of Serbs in Kosovo;
6. That both sides commit themselves to strengthen the administrative and technical capacities of their liaison offices established in 2013.
7. The formation of a Reconciliation Commission, and for historical issues, which will be composed by experts - historians, lawyers, economists, political scientists and others whose basic aim will be to establish scientific and scholarly approach to interpretations of contemporary history, primarily of the 19th and 20th century, and the problems that followed this period; in this way, it will relieve both sides of the extremely unfortunate historical heritage and enable them to strive for true reconciliation.

We should particularly emphasize the fact that the United States, despite numerous other current international problems, has shown significant readiness to return to the problem of the "unfinished" Western Balkans, which has not yet been fully integrated into the EU and NATO, almost two decades since its post-conflict conception. This was shown primarily through their insistence on reaching an agreement regarding the name of Macedonia between the authorities in Skopje and Athens in early June 2018, but also through the announced support to the reform and democratic candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to be held in October current year.

Therefore, the United States, as the most important political but also security actor in the region of Southeast Europe, can provide a significant impetus to both sides in regard to accelerated negotiation dynamics. It can also strengthen the possibility of finding such creative solutions that will contribute to the win-win solution for both sides whose public still has maximalist goals and expectations related to the process of normalization. By achieving this agreement, Serbia would not only accelerate the path to the EU membership, but would also further strengthen the weakened political ties with the United States.

The threats to the implementation of such a positive scenario are certainly related primarily to the potential interfering of Moscow, but also to more significant resistance within the societies of Serbia and Kosovo, which would be expressed through street protests. However, it is obvious that this could not materially jeopardize the application of the potential arrangement.