

# INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON (POSSIBLE) SOLUTION TO SERBIA-KOSOVO ISSUE

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All three envisaged models are relevant and possible in certain manner.

Of course, in their implementation not only the two actors - Serbia and Kosovo - will take part. Apart from engagement of local political forces, which in certain situations can create a strong pressure, the influence of foreign actors on politicians in Belgrade and Priština must not be forgotten either. They were indeed key in all phases of Serbo-Kosovar relations. It is sufficient to note that Kosovo was indeed created as an American project and that despite all changes in Washington it continues to enjoy a strong US support. On the other hand, Russia exactly in the maintenance of such unresolved relations sees a wider opportunity for its presence in the Western Balkans. The European Union is also present in the larger picture of a possible solution, although its capabilities vary, and in the current situation these possibilities are certainly fewer than they were before. Both these elements should be taken into account in a possible implementation of any planned solution.

The *status quo* model has been present since the moment of American engagement in Kosovo. The US, as the Western world leader, have firmly set a thesis that the creation of the state of Kosovo is a separate case and that it cannot be compared with any other situation of possible secession. This created conditions for guaranteeing the existence of Kosovo outside Serbia, for gradual strengthening of a framework for independent state authority and creation of the state of Kosovo. With the US pressure Kosovo is now recognized by more than 100 UN member countries. It is only due to Russia's and China's veto in the UN that Kosovo cannot get a full-fledged recognition and join the international organization. Since Russia is here acting upon the action-reaction model, the status quo is accepted in Moscow as an opportunity to maintain the influence on Serbia and to avoid opening any wider issues that could further deteriorate Russia-US relations. The EU, with its Western Balkans-oriented initiatives, encourages the change of the situation, but as far as it concerns complications which could arise from the change of relations between Serbia and Kosovo it probably also accepts the status quo as an initial situation

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of peace which can possibly lead towards further improvements. Turkey has an interest in Kosovo – Serbia relations being resolved, but within its rather conservative approach it apparently does not want to hastily provoke a solution that would be rushed and that could lead to creation of incident situations. China is monitoring the situation from distance and is not hurrying with any stronger engagement that might change the existing status quo.

The idea of an agreed swap of territories was launched as a sort of a trial balloon that could be of value for both Serbian and Kosovo side. But, with two leaders - Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaci - who had the strength (or were tasked) to propose this option, the international community has remained pretty silent. The US politics has sent several different signals, and the EU through its leaders voiced its disapproval fearing consequences it might cause. The Russian politics is rather cautious and is still weighing whether this could lead to the solution of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo and thus weaken the Russian influence in Belgrade. China and Turkey certainly remain interested but without a desire to get actively involved by proposing any solutions.

In wider international circles the idea of swapping territories actually has two paradigms. Advocates of the first one claim the exchange of territory and delimitation of borders is a positive step which could lead to the final solution of the Serbia-Kosovo issue. Provided that it is “carefully” implemented, the land swap could get the support of population on both sides and thus bring the idea of peace closer to both Serbs and Kosovars. The other paradigm is firmly opposing the exchange of territory citing bad experiences from the past, human rights issues and claim that it would cause even deeper divisions and grievances between Albanians and Serbs. Finally, the land swap opponents argue that the issue of influence on neighbors should also be taken into account, since neighboring countries almost all have similar problems. In other words, they fear that, instead of stabilization of one part of the Balkans, this could lead to even wider destabilization of numerous parts which are, at the moment, more or less peaceful, and where no new models of statehood or para-statehood are being considered.

Normalization of relations cannot occur suddenly. Namely, regardless of the influence of internal and external forces it is impossible to imagine a normalization that would not previously resolve several underlying issues for Serb population in Kosovo and the form of Kosovo statehood, assisted and maintained by foreign forces, which could in turn lead to creation of a model of normal relations. In such a model the two sides would recognize each other as sovereign states without mutual pretensions and open issues. In any case it remains a model for some other time

in which both national structures would be ready to accept it while major factors – the US, EU and Russia - would find (or would have to find) their interest in accepting and supporting it.

### Croatia's view

Within the present dichotomy of Croatia's foreign policy it is hard to denote a line of a unique view on numerous issues, including the relations with Serbia and possible solution of Serbia-Kosovo relations. Due to the war and all that followed, notwithstanding the time that has elapsed since, the relations between Serbia and Croatia hardly change in political sphere. In economy, culture, science and tourism relations developed much faster and are less influenced by political oscillations, however these are still insufficient to influence political positions on their own. Every reckless statement creates strong reactions and both sides are far from establishing normal neighborly relations.

Relations between Serbia and Kosovo are being looked at in the light of overall, notably political goals. Ever since the escalation of the crisis in Kosovo a part of Croatia's political elite saw it as a great opportunity to weaken Serbia and all sympathies were on the side of Kosovars and their aspiration to create their independent state. Ethnic relations within Croatia were observed within the same framework, with a desire to minimize the rights of Serb minority and help the Albanian minority in every possible way, as well as to clearly show sympathies for the Kosovo issue. For that group of Croatian politicians and analysts every, no matter how small, progress towards better relations between Belgrade and Priština is seen as a bad sign, always founded on a belief that a weak Serbia is desirable for Croatian politics and that Croatia, as a NATO and EU member, must strengthen its uncompromising relations towards Belgrade. Since the Serbian minority was drastically reduced and lacks political strength in Croatia, the supporters of such an approach to Serbia are not overly interested for normal relations between Kosovo and Serbia, believing also that the current situation suits Croatia better. Cold political relations, functional cooperation only where needed and evidently useful, remain characteristics of the current approach to Croatia-Serbia relations and the so-called Kosovo issue is viewed primarily in the context of political benefits for Croatia.

Within this group of Croatian actors the idea, or a trial balloon, on the territories swap sparked a special interest. Of course, this interest does not stem from curiosity about the status of future relations between Serbia and Kosovo, but rather from a possibility that this could create some changes on a wider plan. First, this part of Croatian politics is concerned over possible realization of Milorad Dodik's threat of Republika Srpska leaving Bosnia-Hercegovina. Namely, this would make Serbia larger and stronger and the position of Croats in Bosnia-Hercegovina would further deteriorate. Only a smaller number of Croatian analysts are pointing to the possibility that, if that would happen, it would spark a reaction from Croats in Bosnia-Hercegovina who could then revisit the idea of the third entity and creation of Herceg-Bosnia in some form. This idea is especially strengthened after election of Željko Komšić as the Croat representative in Bosnia-Hercegovina's tripartite presidency and it is obvious that it will continue gaining strength among Croats in Bosnia-Hercegovina.

The other group of Croatian political actors is a bit milder in assessment of possibilities for development of relations between Croatia and Serbia. They appeal to the need to create normal neighborly relations that would benefit both sides. In that context the latest propositions regarding Kosovo are seen as a possibility for reaching a solution in which Croatian politics would not actively participate, but would follow everything that opens new possibilities for improvement. On the bilateral plan Croatia will make efforts to maintain a dialogue with Serbia, to constantly insist on the need on solving open issues and to encourage Serbian politics on its path towards EU. This is seen as the best opportunity for development of bilateral relations, but also as a path towards resolving Serbia-Kosovo issues.

Although not specially accented in this approach, in both approaches it is evident that Croatia will use its voice during Serbia's possible EU entry. This was already announced on several occasions when values that Serbia would have to accept were emphasized, as well as insistence on resolving specific issues dating from Serbia's aggression against Croatia (notably the issue of missing persons). Although this cannot influence Serbo-Kosovar relations directly, it is evident that such Croatian position will have a wider importance for relations in the region and for possible weakening or strengthening of Serbian political positions regarding the EU, and through that for possibilities for resolving the Kosovo issue.

The importance of bilateral relations between Croatia and Serbia by far exceed the mere relations between the two neighboring countries. They reflect the issues of relations from the past, position of ethnic minorities, relations towards neighbors (notably Bosnia-Hercegovina), but

also a wider plethora of relations in the Western Balkans. Croatia views its political relations with Serbia as an important axis not only of their bilateral relations, but also for relations towards other actors in the Balkans. The above mentioned situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina remains the one that will occupy the attention of Croatian politics for a long time to come, since due to the length of their mutual border, economic relations and Croat people living there Croatia has a vested interest in positive development of relations, but at the same time must pay attention to all the dangers that might arise from possible changes in Bosnia-Herzegovina (stronger Serbia's influence, more independent politics of Republika Srpska).

On the other hand, Croatia still has an open border issue with Montenegro (Prevlaka) and there is also the issue of property over "Jadran" training ship which is raised from time to time by the Croatian side. New relations in Macedonia are also important for Croatian politics and it is maximally engaged in advocating for acceptance of the country's new name, same as in a bid that Macedonia shortly becomes a NATO member and eventually joins the EU.

However, these relations with other Balkans countries are overshadowed by relations between Croatia and Serbia and by the view that the stability in the region substantially depends on these two actors. This view is in large part shared by European leaders who never miss the opportunity to underline the need for stabilization and are leaving possibilities for EU entry opened (some day in distant future).

The turbulent situation in the Western Balkans however shows some features that can be seen as a common denominator of problems. The whole region faces a difficult economic situation, lacks foreign investments, sees deep splits within the societies, considerable emigration of young and qualified workforce, corruption, fear of immigration and low level of mutual trust and cooperation. On the other hand nationalisms and xenophobia are on the rise, which in certain situations influence political leaders as well.

In some countries (Kosovo, Macedonia, Croat part of Bosnia), NATO and EU membership are seen as miraculous solutions for all the problems. However, since due to various reasons the initiatives from these organizations are being prolonged, convictions that Euro-Atlantism represents the salvation are gradually losing foot.

Serbia is, of course, a specific case, and its desire to join the EU is not linked with entering NATO. On the other hand, it is obvious that the Russian influence is still strong and that during the possible approach to EU Belgrade will have to take into account Moscow views, which still has the means to influence that process. Therefore, NATO remains a topic for some other times and for some other Serbian leaders.

An objective monitor of international relations should agree with the conclusion that, within such a complex situation of bilateral relations between the Western Balkans countries, easing of relations between Belgrade and Priština could have a considerable positive effect. The region is interconnected to such an extent where every negative or positive development immediately finds its answer in the neighborhood, which certainly applies to Serbia-Kosovo relations as well. If one adds Albania to the picture, which also carefully monitors these developments with a view on ethnic Albanian population in southern Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo, it is clear to which extent this, so-called peripheral issue, could gain on its importance.

EU and NATO are aware of this and both organizations do not miss a chance to, at least verbally, support steps leading towards creation of a different Western Balkans. Croatia as an EU and NATO member should stick to such Euro-Atlantic approach and use every opportunity to help easing the tensions and building new relations.

This, of course, and taking into account the importance of two countries, applies notably to relations between Zagreb and Belgrade which in all projections of future development remain a central issue. In regard to Serbia-Kosovo relations, Croatian politics of course cannot have a decisive role, however it could be more active in bringing the views of the two countries closer. In this Croatia should be led by its own interests, but it should also follow guidelines developed by NATO and EU. Since in today's world, marked by numerous crisis and conflicts, it is obvious that the Western Balkans countries must sooner or later become part of Europe and that without them Europe as a structure will be neither complete nor safe.