

THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF PROTRACTED BELGRADE-PRISTINA NEGOTIATIONS: A VIEW FROM MONTENEGRO

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“... we are also eager to see this dispute settle. It is in everyone’s interest in the Balkans for this chapter to be closed. To close it in the interest of both peoples, both countries. Montenegro has always supported the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, very strongly, as we have very good rapport with both sides. Of course, we preserve the right to maintain our concerns regarding potential implications caused by any solution that is based on the idea of territorial exchange. The exchange of territories has always been a very sensitive issue in the Balkans. If that happens, the arrangement should be coupled with provisions that would guarantee the security of the Balkans. We wish that our neighbors settle their relations in the best way possible. We encourage them on that path. At the same time we all need to keep in mind the broader architecture of the Western Balkans, so it does not get disturbedⁱ.”

Srđan Darmanović,
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro,
September 25, 2018

The “Kosovo question”, in its various historical iterations, has been one of the central themes in Montenegrin politics for over a century. In order to set the backdrop for the ongoing political and geo-strategic dilemmas generated by Belgrade-Pristina talks, this paper will depart from a succinct overview of the genesis, development and repercussions various forms of this question have had in Montenegro. In doing so, the paper will primarily focus on the issue of borders and statehood, in order to decode the underpinning dynamics that inform present day political positions, as illustrated by the comments of the Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs Darmanović. As a result, the paper will elaborate on the evident apprehension the current administration in Podgorica has with any solution that stipulates change of existing borders along ethno-nationalist lines.

In order to provide a comprehensive assessment of all potential scenarios, the present paper will conduct a SWOT analysis of three different scenarios, which have dominated the current state of public debate: 1) *preserving the status quo/postponing the*

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solving of the problem; 2) Serbia–Kosovo border changes/swapping of territories and/or the normalization of relations; 3) achievement of a legally binding bilateral agreement aimed to be reached through the ongoing EU-moderated Serbia–Kosovo negotiations.

The analysis will examine the consequences of each scenario in terms of domestic socio-political dynamics in Montenegro, with a particular emphasis on its security. Moreover, the analysis will also emphasise the impact of each scenario on bilateral relations between Montenegro and each disputing side. Lastly, the analysis will also explore the bearing each scenario may have on the broader regional security.

Scenario 1: Maintaining the status quo

Strengths: As the youngest NATO member state and a country that, compared to its neighbours, has advanced the most on its path toward the EU, Montenegrin government may see this scenario as an opportunity to maintain its frontrunner image and conveniently use the existing advantage over other states in the region for domestic purposes as an indication of well-thought through policy choices. The status quo may further strengthen the existing regional multilateral forums, which represent the main format through which regional dialogue is fostered. This will warrant further support from the international community. On the short run status quo may guarantee that the international community keeps a keen eye on the developments in the region, and as such support the existing multilateral formats that have proven to be effective.

Weaknesses: With no effective normalisation in sight, any further Europeanisation of the region is uncertain. On the one hand, continuation of territorial and political disputes minimizes the ability of the region to achieve the needed standards for EU accession. On the other, it opens the doors for other geopolitical players to consolidate their relevance in the region, and potentially halt and reverse further progress towards the EU. Although Montenegrin authorities may use the existing frontrunner image as a demonstration of sound policy planning, the lack of progress by other countries in the region, may reduce the ability of Montenegro to find support for a merit-based ‘one-country regatta’ when it comes to EU accession. Domestically this may be seen as a weakness of the country to pursue its policy goals without a more stable region. Moreover, status quo in the negotiations will cement the existing polarizing views across the political spectrum. A large part of the opposition parties may use the status quo to further their demand to the government to unrecognize Kosovo. Although this may not have any immediate effect, such narratives may be conveniently used by those opposition parties to mobilize parts of the electorate which are more pro-Serbian in their choices. As a consequence, a potential maintenance of the status quo in Belgrade-Pristina dialogue will also consolidate existing polarizing narratives between pro-Serbian opposition parties and the governing parties around DPS.

Opportunities: Status quo may offer an opportunity for Montenegro, at least on the short run, to expedite its accession to the EU, and maintain the frontrunner position in the existing regatta. For the government of Montenegro the status quo may serve as an opportunity to offer support for the mediation efforts the EU is undertaking. Such support may come in the form of informal talks between two sides, strengthening the regional contacts and communication in various regional multilateral bodies and forums. With the status quo, Montenegro may further strengthen its relations with Kosovo, while attempting not to jeopardize its already fragile relations with Serbia.

Threats: An extended status quo may significantly impact domestic dynamics in Montenegro. The lack of clarity regarding the final solution may deepen the existing political divide between the ruling parties and pro-Serbian opposition. Such narratives may find additional support in their opposing views on Montenegro's foreign policy priorities. Montenegrin membership in NATO may require specific contribution to its KFOR mission in Kosovo, which in turn may be used as a convenient proxy to further polarize the existing domestic political debate. Finally, the status quo may further deteriorate already turbulent relations between the government and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which is a vocal supporter of status quo. The fact that Montenegro has already recognized Kosovo reduces its ability to engage with Serbia as an impartial mediator, but it may frame its approach using the European agenda as an incentive that may generate a degree of Serbian cooperation.

Scenario 2: Territorial exchanges and/or normalisation of relations between the two sides

Strengths: As mentioned in the opening quote by Minister Darmanovic, for Montenegro this scenario may be acceptable in case it was coupled with security guarantees that will maintain the stability in the region. If such provisions are upheld, coupled with a formula that fully satisfies Serbia and Kosovo, this solution may represent the first step toward a full normalisation of relations not only between the two sides, but across the region. For all countries in the region, including Montenegro, this may serve as an opportunity to focus their energy toward EU accession and consolidation of their democratic systems. Normalized relations between Serbia and Kosovo would be a signal to the EU that the region is ready to accelerate its accession talks, and that they are putting the past behind. Montenegro may benefit from this scenario, as the frontrunner in accession talks, knowing that the EU will have an incentive to support the entire region using this as a 'carrot' for cooperative behavior that would gain traction. Full normalization would not require mutual recognition between Serbia and Kosovo, but rather acceptance that they would not hamper each other in perusal of their domestic and foreign policy goals. In such an environment Montenegro would be able to engage with both sides in a constructive

manner, and use it as an opportunity reduce tensions that have characterized its relations with Serbia following the decision to recognize Kosovo. Domestically for Montenegro, this would mean that one of the core issues of contention will no longer bear any relevance.

Weaknesses: Lack of serious security guarantees, coupled with a troubling lack of clarity what kind of territorial exchanges the two sides have in mind, amplify uncertainty and confusion throughout the region. The apprehension over potential solutions that are being explored behind the scenes, creates a sense of suspicion and distrust which is conditioning regional dynamics. Although Montenegro may support a mutually acceptable agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, it is still cautions to endorse just any solution, especially as some solutions may strongly influence its own internal stability. Moreover, the lack of clarity about the character of expected normalisation, may still generate a sense of apprehension how sustainable such agreements may be.

Opportunities: A minor “cosmetic” border demarcation, may be a useful opportunity to stabilise and normalise relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which in turn may offer an opportunity for Montenegro to eliminate an important point of contention that has dominated the domestic discourse. Similarly, interim agreements which may regulate the control of borders, may foster a sense of cooperation on the long term. Solutions such as the interim agreement between Montenegro and Croatia regarding Prevlaka may serve as a useful formula how interim solutions may reduce distrust between the parties and foster a sense of interdependence in the medium term.

Threats: Territorial exchanges and border corrections represent a highly sensitive topic in the Western Balkans. They strengthen the existing ethno-nationalistic forces, by promoting the ideas of ethnically homogenous territories. Such solutions undermine all policies aimed at establishing civic identities, and put in jeopardy policies of inclusion and multiculturalism. The requests to redraw borders may increase. Territorial integrity of all Western Balkan states may be brought into question. The ideas that borders are not permanent may inspire unrest and internal turmoil across the region, and Montenegro would not be exempt from such dynamics. As a NATO member state Montenegro may not face threats from outside, however internally a potential territorial exchange between Serbia and Kosovo may inspire various political forces in Montenegro to demand new territorial division and even new constitutional arrangements.

Scenario 3: Legally binding solution

Strengths: This type of solution may provide the highest degree of certainty and predictability for the two sides, and the region as a whole. Montenegro would strongly

benefit from a stable regional relations, as they will guarantee a smoother process towards the EU integration, and may further strengthen existing multilateral regional relations.

Weaknesses: Reaching a legally binding solution has proven to be nothing short of absolute miracle, as it requires an unprecedented degree of compromise and concession-making by both sides. Insistence on such a solution may prolong the process for an unforeseeable future, adding a layer of unnecessary uncertainty for all countries in the region. The sensitive nature of this solution increases resistance from both sides, and as such makes the prospects of reaching it very elusive.

Opportunities: Such a solution would provide a template for similar problems in the region to be dealt with in a similar fashion. The fact that it would have been achieved thanks to EU mediation, would further improve enthusiasm over EU accession across the region.

Threats: A legally binding solution would require implementation monitoring, and implementation assistance. Without such oversight and support the very nature of this agreement may be undermined. Moreover, in order to find a suitable formula for such an agreement would require a significant investment of time and efforts on behalf of the EU, which is currently preoccupied with other challenges, both internal and external, and is looking toward an upcoming electoral cycle in May 2019. A stalled negotiations, which are focused on a legally binding solution as the only option may be used as a tactical tool by those who see no merits in a negotiated solution, and are trying to buy time hoping that the near future may bring new geopolitical circumstances that may favor either a status quo or anything less than a legally binding solution. The waste of time and energy will significantly influence the image of the EU across the region, and its ability to project authority and direction for all countries that aspire to join the EU.

ⁱ "... mi takođe želimo da se taj spor riješi. To je u svačijem interesu na Balkanu. Da se zatvori jedno poglavlje. Da se zatvori u interesu oba naroda, i obje zemlje. Tako da je Crna Gora oduvijek podržavala kosovski dijalog, dijalog Kosova i Srbije, veoma snažno, jer imamo veoma dobre odnose sa obje strane. Naravno, mi pri tome zadržavamo svoje zabrinutosti oko toga šta može donijeti rješenje zasnovano na razmjeni teritorija. Razmjena teritorija na Balkanu je uvijek osjetljiv posao. Ukoliko se to desi, taj aranžman bi morao biti praćen nekim garancijama o tome da će Balkan biti stabilan. Mi želimo da naši susjedi na najbolji način riješe svoje odnose. U tome ih ohrabujemo. Ali takođe da svi zajedno vodimo računa o nešto široj arhitekturi Zapadnog Balkana, da ona ne bi bila poremećena." Darmanović: Odnosi stabilnog partnerstva sa SAD. *Voice of America*. September 25, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/darmanovic-odnosi-stabilnog-partnerstva-sa-sad/4587059.html>