

SERBIA–KOSOVO RELATIONS AND SECURITY IN MACEDONIA

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Introduction

The fragility and unclear resolution of the tense Serbian-Kosovan relations is potentially the most destabilizing threat to the peaceful and secure future of the region of South-Eastern Europe. Clearly for many countries in the region this frozen conflict represents if not a security threat – than a serious security challenge or risk. For Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to certain extent Montenegro, the Kosovo issue influences the internal security dynamics, one could even argue, even risking the very existence of these countries. In Serbia three potential scenarios for the future of the Belgrade–Prishtina relations have been identified as possible: 1) preserving a status quo/ postponing the solving of the problem; 2) Serbia-Kosovo border changes/ swapping of territories; 3) normalization of relations based on legally binding bilateral agreement to be reached through the ongoing EU-moderated Serbia-Kosovo negotiations. Pursuing any of the three paths will have ramifications on the political developments in the neighboring countries. This paper elaborates on the security consequences of the three possible scenarios for the future of Serbia–Kosovo relations on Macedonia. By security consequences we understand impacts of each scenario on 1) interethnic-relations in and its security policy; 2) bilateral/multilateral relations' and 3) security in the region of South Eastern Europe.

Current Developments in Serbian-Kosovan Relations the three options considered

Serbia has been trying to keep its policy on Kosovo separate from its aspiration to join the EU. However, the EU has made clear that Serbia's progress towards accession depends on improving its relations with Kosovo. However, recognition of the independence of Kosovo could prove to be an insurmountable obstacle. Despite changes of governments in Serbia, the policy and discourse on Kosovo remains the same. It seems that no government in Belgrade in the near future is willing to recognise Kosovo's independence. There is a risk that Serbia might abandon the accession process. If the gridlock persists, there is a risk that the credibility of the enlargement process is disputed. There is a risk that the enlargement process will remain in doubt so long as "member states continue to make the accession process hostage to bilateral complaints, thereby undermining the element of fairness in the conditionality principle." (Fouere, 2014:8) For these reasons EU diplomacy has been very active in improving Serbian- Kosovan relations. Through

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diplomatic efforts, the EU has made headway in mediating the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina, including the signature of the Brussels Agreement in April 2013. Small progress has been made since. President Aleksandar Vučić has in 2018 attempted to offer a new possibility for a final agreement between Belgrade and Pristina that would open the way for Serbia's accession to the EU.

There is no clear indication which exact areas would be covered by the border changes and which demarcation lines the new borders would follow. How the borders will be demarcated, who will decide on the demarcation, and whether any international bodies or experts would be called to participate in this demarcation project is still unclear. The assumption is that the arrangement proposed by Vucic and President Hashim Thaçi would have all or part of north Kosovo 'given' to Serbia, in exchange for all or part of Serbia's remaining Albanian-majority lands, which are contiguous to Kosovo in the Preshevo valley. The presumed exchange on Kosovo revolves around three municipalities in South Serbia (Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medveda) with significant Albanian share of the local population and three or four Serb-dominated municipalities in Kosovo's north that are contiguous with Serbia (Lipjan, Leposavic, Zubin Potok, and parts of Mitrovica.) In parallel, Serbia would accept Kosovo's independence and open to it the path to full international recognition.

Both countries aspire EU membership, but neither is likely to accede unless Serbia and Kosovo normalize relations. The EU could only admit a state which is recognized by all of its Member States; and Kosovo is not recognized by five EU Member States, Slovakia, Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Spain, primarily because Serbia does not recognize it. If Serbia were to recognize Kosovo, these five states are most likely to follow suit. Negotiations are happening under the mediation of the EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini. This land swap would result in fewer Serbs living in Kosovo and fewer Albanians in Serbia. Both countries would become more "ethnically pure".

The reaction of the international community has been mixed. On the one hand," John Bolton, U.S. national security advisor, in August 2018, commented that "we don't exclude territorial adjustments. ... we think they've got to solve it for themselves." On the other hand, speaking of talks on territorial swaps between Serbia and Kosovo, Angela Merkel stated that "the territorial integrity of the states of the Western Balkans has been established and is inviolable." Similarly, Michael Roth, Germany's minister of state for Europe, warned of opening a "Pandora's box," while Sabine Stoehr, the head of the western Balkan division in the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin, said at the 2018 Belgrade Security Forum in that "we are really and seriously concerned how the aim of the dialog has been framed, that territory is the only solution to anything, we do not believe that this will lead to a sustainable solution. Focusing on territory will lead the dialog to a deadlock."

Some political commentators and international figures have supported the potential territorial exchange. Charles Kupchan, former adviser to Barack Obama and now a professor at Georgetown University, has described the tentative plan as “peaceful ethnic cleansing”. Supportive of the land-swap idea, he believes “pragmatism needs to trump principle”. (New York Times 2018) Commenting for Politico, Marko Prelec, professor at Central European University, stated that there is “no solution to the Kosovo conundrum without an agreement both sides genuinely support, and a land swap is the key to such a deal.”(Politico 2018) Wolfgang Petritsch, the EU’s main negotiator at the Kosovo peace talks, also backed the idea of Serbian-Kosovan territorial swap. (N1 2018) The editorial board of *The Financial Times* cautiously supported the proposed agreement claiming that once in place “moving both countries towards EU membership would strengthen democratic and economic reforms, and send a broader signal that the integration of the Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions, however slow, continues.” (2018)

On the other hand, there were many influential voices against the proposed border changes. Edward Joseph commented in *Foreign Policy* that “there can be no deal on swapping Kosovo territory until negotiations on the Dayton Agreement Constitution for Bosnia are reopened and concluded” and that the West “cannot afford to allow a reckless deal on Kosovo to destabilize the country that saw the bloodiest fighting.” (2018) Tim Judah, explains in *The Economist* that “if Kosovo and Serbia begin serious talks about a redrawing of their borders, the impact on Balkan communities apart from those in the affected parts of Kosovo and Serbia could be profound.” (2018) Peddy Ashdown and fellow former EU high representatives Carl Bildt and Christian Schwarz-Schilling issued an open letter urging Federica Mogherini not to support a land swap. If you want to “go around creating mono-ethnic pockets in the Balkans, then you really have to redraw a lot of borders, and eventually [you] end up with ethnically pure states.” (Radio Free Europe 2018) Carl Bildt warned that “playing with borders and divisions in the Balkans was dangerous in the early 1990s, and remains so now,” (The Washington Post 2018b)

Having discussed the positive and negative options regarding the possible border changes let us now turn to the other two options for the Belgrade- Prishtina relations. Preserving a status quo/ postponing the solving of the problem has an obvious positive element in allowing the two sides to work on democratization of both countries before some kind of a deal is made. On the other hand, the prolongation of the unsolved status of Kosovo will inevitably lead to frustrations among the elites of both countries and could negatively affect the situation in the Northern part of Kosovo. As EU has conditioned the resolution of the Kosovo question to the progress in the accession process of both countries the postponement might not result in the intended moderation of the elites in Belgrade and Prishtina but to their radicalization. The North of Kosovo is a region that anticipates obtaining some kind of territorial autonomy as envisioned by the so-

called Brussels agreement. Elites in Prishtina, on the other hand, see this territory as being not fully under their control and might want to achieve this by force at some point of time. Prolongation of the solving of the problem raises the possibility of a conflict in Mitrovica and the surrounding area.

The third possible solution to the problem between these two countries, normalization of relations based on legally binding bilateral agreement to be reached through the ongoing EU-moderated Serbia-Kosovo negotiations is a very good and positive idea. It would clear the way for progress of both countries in the EU accession process and would contribute to the stabilization of the interethnic relations in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Depending on the content of the agreement it might be sufficient to establish Kosovo as an internationally recognized state in the UN and to allow Serbia to accede to the EU as quick as possible, with guarantees about the status of the Serbs in North Kosovo. The negative of reaching a legally binding bilateral agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina is that it might be perceived as treasonous by right wingers in both countries. For Serbs, the possibility of international recognition of Kosovo is very difficult to accept in any form. Even if the legally binding bilateral agreement does not allow for UN admittance and would leave the international recognition of Kosovo dependent on the skills of the Prishtina diplomacy, putting on paper a treaty that acknowledges the legal existence of the southern neighbor is very difficult for Serbs to accept. The price the Kosovo Albanians would most likely pay for reaching such an agreement would be that the North of the country is given autonomy as prescribed with the Brussels agreement. This might be a cost that Kosovo Albanians are not willing to pay or would be ready to vehemently protest.

The Complexness of Macedonia- current developments

The regime change in Macedonia occurred in 2017 following the parliamentary elections in 2016 which saw the then ruling conservative party VMRO-DPMNE lose seats in the Parliament at the expense of the social democrats, SDSM. The underlying story behind the improved result of SDSM that contributed to it being able to make a coalition government in 2017 was the reaching out to ethnic Albanian votes, a first significant success of a non-Macedonian Albanian party to get such votes in the country since independence. To do so SDSM in its electoral platform incorporated and improved the Albanian national agenda in Macedonia. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev at the elections in 2016 offered redefinition of the interethnic relations in Macedonia stipulated by the Ohrid Framework Agreement from 2001.

At the elections, SDSM had the campaign called “Plan for Life in Macedonia”. The general promises made by Zaev were higher wages, democratization, decent job, and justice for all.

However, SDSM had special campaign for attracting “Albanian” voters, a promise to change the balance of power and the rights of ethnic Albanians agreed in Ohrid. Quite a few Albanians in Macedonia believed this electoral pledge as SDSM won 38,162 Albanian votes from the total of 435,079. (CRPM Study 2017) These 8.8% of the total number of votes were a significant factor for winning MP seats and forming the new Government afterwards. However, SDSM disturbed the plans of the ethnic Albanian parties. They reacted with radicalization, or ethnic outbidding. The ethnic outbidding in the political sciences is analyzed as a term when ethnic parties adopt radical strategies aimed to maximize the support from the voters from a particular ethnic group to represent themselves as the real fighters for the *cause* and weaken the legitimacy, delegitimize the political rivals representing that community. (Gormley-Heenan, MacGinty, 2008:44)

The theory of ethnic outbidding emphasizes that it leads to extreme competition, offering more radical options for the public policies that lead to the danger of destroying the political system itself. Ethnic outbidding happens when the politicians compete to get the support of a certain ethnic community and make requirements in favor of that community over the others. It is a process when within an ethnic community the political competition comes down to proving which party is a bigger defender of the community’s interests.(Coakley 2008) Whatever the policy or circumstances leading to ethnic outbidding, it makes ethnic negotiations almost impossible, since even the moderate ethnic elites are being radicalized, and the public discourse follows their actions. The ethnic outbidding in the divided societies can have serious political consequences, and can even lead to conflicts and eventually war.

As Gunter and Diamond say, “the electoral logic of the ethnic parties is to mobilize the base with polarized statements, by pointing out the opportunities that community should use, by threats...ethnic exclusivity of their political messages and their polarization effect have disintegrative effect and division of the society.”(2001:23-4) Other renowned political scientists, such as Samuel Huntington, think that ethnic parties are dangerous to the democratization of a country. He even points out that many countries from the so-called “Third World” did not manage to sustain the democracy due to the strong influence of the ethnic parties. (1991) One of the major experts on minorities and conflicts, Ted Gurr, goes as far as saying that almost all cases of civil wars in the last years were result of overtaking the government by ethnic parties and promoting their exclusivist political agenda.

Where is the ethnic outbidding in the Macedonian context? After the elections in 2016, DUI, Alliance for Albanians and BESA negotiated a new political agenda in Tirana, a political platform that seeks to extend the agreed reforms in Ohrid in 2001. It was announced on 6 January, 2017, as the so-called “Tirana Platform”, requiring realization of goals, “in the future government mandate and/or in each future mandate,” to increase the power of the Albanian

political entities in the country. It de facto aims to changes in the Ohrid Framework Agreement from 2001 and redefine the Republic of Macedonia as a non-territorial federation.

The platform also foresees promotion of the Albanians' status, among else through realization of the right of "equitable implementation of the multiethnic principle in the Constitution of Macedonia, where the Albanians are [to be] considered as state-building nation...", achieving complete language equity, use of the Albanian language at all levels of governance and guarantee that it will be applied as a fundamental and constitutional right. It is foreseen that the Constitution should define the "Macedonian language and its Cyrillic alphabet and the Albanian language and its alphabet as official languages in the Republic of Macedonia", to open a comprehensive debate about the flag, anthem and coat of arms "in order the state symbols to reflect the societal multiethnicity and ethnic equity." Within the ideas of reaching economic equity and social welfare, especially through equal regional development, the Platform demands to "create one Ministry of Political System and Inter-Ethnic Relations, as an authorized institution for recognizing the rights of the communities and stimulation of economic and social development in the underdeveloped areas", "realization of equity in the security forces, the army, the prosecutors and the courts", "taking affirmative measures to provide financing for the Albanian cultural institutions at central and local level", as well as "realization of equity at all levels of central government and public services or stakeholders entities." In the foreign affairs it requires inclusion of "Albanians in the working group for direct negotiations with Greece and Bulgaria", "collaboration with Kosovo and Albania for integrated board management", as well as "opening new border crossings." Besides the other requirements at a lower symbolic level, it insists on adopting the "Resolution of the Republic of Macedonia condemning the genocide over the Albanian people in Macedonia in the period from 1912-1956."

After the platform was published, VMRO-DPMNE did not manage to make a coalition Government with DUI, it was SDSM who did it, bringing also along the Alliance for Albanians. On the other hand, as a consequence of the radicalization in the requirements from the Albanian political parties, a new Macedonian protest movement involving also the other minor ethnical communities was formed. It was led by artists, such as Boris Damovski, Bogdan Ilievski, and Igor Durlovski, united under the motto of "For United Macedonia" aiming to stop the implementation of the Tirana platform, asking the President of the Republic not to give the mandate to SDSM and legalize the coalition. The three-month protests' culminated on 27th April when in the Parliament, the parliamentary groups of SDSM, DUI and Alliance for Albanians irregularly elected the President of the Parliament. A group of protestors entered the Parliament and occupied the assembly hall and Press Centre, and some attacked MPs from SDSM and Alliance for Albanians, including their leaders Zaev and Sela. Macedonia was very close to the worst scenario of people being killed victims and even a civil war starting. Despite improving Macedonian- Albanian relations remain tense regarding specific policy issues such as the Law on Languages which is to

regulate the usage of Albanian in public institutions on the whole territory of the country not just in areas where they live in significant numbers.

Security consequences of the three possible scenarios for the future of Serbia-Kosovo relations on Macedonia

Here we discuss the impacts of each scenario on 1) interethnic-relations in and its security policy; 2) bilateral/multilateral relations; and 3) security in the region of South Eastern Europe. In case of an agreement including border changes between Serbia and Kosovo the interethnic relations in Macedonia and its security policy would be very negatively affected. Opening the Pandora box of border corrections would be dangerous for the whole region and in particular for Macedonia. Albanians in Macedonia already push for the implementation of the Tirana Platform which de facto seeks to establish a bi-national state. The bilateral relations of Macedonia and Serbia in case of an agreement including border changes might improve. The normalization of relations of Belgrade and Prishtina would mean Skopje would not need to take sides in international and multilateral fora. On the other hand, the relations with Prishtina might decline if there would be restlessness of Albanians in Macedonia concerning their status and the potential for border changes that would let them join their co-ethnics from Kosovo. The security in the region of South Eastern Europe after an agreement including border changes between Serbia and Kosovo would not only endanger Macedonia, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina, and potentially Montenegro.

In case of preserving a status quo/ postponing the solving of the problem between Serbia and Kosovo there would not be significant effect interethnic-relations in Macedonia and its security policy. The processes described around the ethnic outbidding and the Tirana Platform are serious and require delicate approach by Macedonian policy makers. The effects on bilateral/multilateral relations will also be minimal as Macedonian governments will continue to try to balance their relations with Serbia and Kosovo, also taking into account the position of Skopje's allies in Brussels and Washington D.C. Finally, in case of preserving a status quo/ postponing the solving of the problem between Serbia and Kosovo, the security in the region of South Eastern Europe will not be affected negatively. Considering that Macedonia is to join NATO in 2019 or early 2020, the security in the region will improve, and keeping the status quo might be beneficial to it.

Normalization of relations between Prishtina and Belgrade based on legally binding bilateral agreement to be reached through the ongoing EU-moderated Serbia-Kosovo negotiations would have a positive effect on interethnic-relations in Macedonia and its security policy. Such an agreement together with Skopje's accession to NATO would significantly increase

the power of forces for institutional solutions to Macedonian interethnic problems and would firmly anchor the unity of the country. A potential bilateral agreement would improve the bilateral relations of Macedonia with both Kosovo and Serbia, while relaxing the position of the country vis-à-vis its northern neighbors in multilateral for a. Finally, legally binding bilateral agreement would positively influence the security of the region and prevent negative developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusion

The paper explains that while preserving the status quo entails a number of challenges it is very dangerous for the region and Macedonia if the proposed territorial swap between Kosovo and Serbia takes place. If Belgrade and Pristina exchange territory, this would open a “Pandora’s box” in the Balkans, with ethnically divided Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia potential flash points. As Edward Joseph argues, Albanians of Macedonia are intimately connected to their kin in Kosovo, and “no matter the pledges by Albanian leaders in Macedonia to remain in the country, the logic of secession will return, particularly once the new, ethnically homogenous Kosovo joins up with Albania.” (2018) As Gordy writes “there are almost certainly other solutions to the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina, involving elements that have not entered the discussion very much to date: securing the well-being of citizens, enhancing security and freedom, and building relations of trust between and within communities.” (2018)

A counter strategy is to achieve justice in multiethnic states such as Kosovo. Trust and security, well-being of all citizens no matter their ethnic background is the concept of ethno-cultural justice which is needed in Kosovo and Macedonia for the two countries to progress and stabilize. Improving minority rights for Serbs in Kosovo and Albanians in Macedonia is crucial here. Specific policy issues such as the Law on Languages in Macedonia and the Law on Association of Communities in Northern Kosovo should be carefully discussed and implemented with the help of EU officials within the enlargement process. These and other possible contentious issues should not be treated as zero- sum games but as win- win possibilities for gaining trust and cooperation in the future.

Having in mind that the rationale behind the idea of a territorial swap for President Vucic is the fact that it is very unlikely that the EU will have Serbia as a member if it does not establish good neighbourly relations with an independent Kosovo, one solution of the conundrum would be that Serbia should be allowed to tackle this issue at the very end of the negotiations process. While negotiations last and normalization of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina progresses the status of the Serbian minority in Kosovo must be upheld with a special attention to the Serbian municipalities in the North. If in due time the situation of Serbs in Kosovo is well accepted

by the public in Serbia there might be a window of opportunity that Belgrade recognizes the independence of Prishtina at the time when the country would be acceding to the EU. If and when Serbia accedes to the EU special controlling mechanism should be put in place in order to secure that Belgrade would not be able to block progress of Kosovo's accession. Therefore, for Macedonia the best case scenario would be that normalization of relations between Prishtina and Belgrade based on legally binding bilateral agreement.

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