



# Groundhog Day on the Balkans – the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue

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This year's talks between Serbia and Kosovo organized in Berlin in January, Brussels in July and Washington in September proved a new engagement by the Western oriented international community in relation to the long-year frozen dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The Berlin talks, held at the US embassy in January this year, left an impression that the USA are giving "new life" to the normalization process of Serbia and Kosovo. The US were not ready to leave the dialogue entirely to the EU. However, this new economic meeting had the same flaws as the EU facilitated one – it lacked transparency and clarity. Despite that, the attempt to revive the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue giving it an economic impetus could turn out to be productive, as it leaves the heavy political questions for to be resolved at a later stage.

The following negotiations between Kosovo's Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić in Brussels, brought up, among other things, both countries' economic cooperation and the resolving of the issue of missing persons. But the newly restarted dialogue was missing the same energy and determination as the talks brokered by the US. Both parties left the impression that they didn't expect larger progress and only were buying time, hoping that the American led process would play in their favor.

However, the American initiative culminated with the signing of the Washington agreement on 4. September. It was unclear if this undertaking of the US administration had the support of the EU, or if it was seen as a threat of overtaking the whole process from the Europeans. But Brussels stayed calm and accepted the new situation, even welcoming the efforts to help getting the dialogue back on track. In any case, the picture of Hoti and Vučić at the oval office went around the world.

Regarding the agreement's content, the reaction of the Serbian public was very ambivalent. Some welcomed the agreement as an important milestone in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, as well as a long-awaited step towards closer relations with the US. Others saw disadvantages on the side of Belgrade in comparison to the one of Pristina, being (not) allowed to lobby about Kosovo's international legal status. Apart from other possible disadvantages for Serbia regarding the energy and communication sector which would limit the gas and oil import from Russia and abandon 5G equipment by Huawei from China, this agreement finally leaves one important question open: is the provided paper actually a legally binding document?

## Disagreement in resources – profit from the status-quo in both countries

One of the most valuable natural resources in Kosovo is the artificial Gazivoda lake that has enormous significance for the electricity and water supply of the whole country, and that is also subject to the Washington agreement. The existence of the Serbs in the north pretty much depends on this lake. The same goes for Pristina that fears that Bel-

grade could misuse Gazivoda against them. Both, Belgrade and Pristina claim the lake as theirs. Geographically it is divided by the border between Serbia and Kosovo, which explains the strategic importance of it. The past has shown that this is a serious security question and that it could threaten the fragile peace. The newly signed Washington agreement stipulates the need of dividing the lake between Belgrade and Pristina under the supervision of the US Department of Energy. This could once again show the efficiency of US diplomacy, provided that both parties fulfill their parts of the deal. Yet it bares as well the risk that the US will try to overtake the energy sector of Kosovo and play the main role there.

One has to name it: talking about economy means to talk about organized crime – the only flourishing “industry” in Kosovo. When it comes to it, however, there are no interethnic animosities and it could be said that this is one of the rare fields where the Albanian and Serbian side fully cooperate, and have a vivid trade exchange, as well as common interests. The number of attacks in the North of Kosovo on politicians, members of the police, entrepreneurs etc. has risen in recent years, significantly since the Srpska lista (Serbian list), backed by the Serbian government in Belgrade, took power after local elections in 2017. Srpska lista receives financial and political support from Belgrade and in return has to pursue the political aims dictated from Belgrade. The party has moreover monopolized the right to represent the Serbs in Kosovo and uses a very aggressive form of campaigning to show the Serbian public in Kosovo that there is no one else who could represent their interests and take care of their well-being. The Serbian list and its high-ranking members have financial interests in maintaining the status quo in Northern Kosovo. They also have close ties to the criminal underground in Kosovo as well as to the Kosovo-Albanian political elite.

After the Kosovo war the remainders of the Kosovo Liberation Army changed their profession and swapped over to being politicians, furthermore, to elected political decision-makers. The most renowned politicians with a dark past are most definitely Ramush Haradinaj, Hashim Thaci and Kadri Veseli. All three were indicted by the court in The Hague, as they are held guilty for war crimes against Serbs, Roma and Albanians sceptical to the cause of the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). They are as well entangled and involved with the organized crime scene in the country, for the KLA financed itself from the revenues of drug and human trafficking, and so the circle is complete.

### **Preference of nice reports over real assessment**

After its announcement, the Brussels agreement was praised as a milestone in the Belgrade-Pristina relations. But the optimism did not last for long, as it fast became clear that the signing of the contract is not the same as its implementation. This document is full of ambiguities which left a major part of the deal unimplemented. Apart from that, the main problem so far with all the agreements between Belgrade and Pristina is that there are no real legal consequences for not complying with them, as in the case with the CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement) and now the one signed in Brussels, when the EU failed to use its power and justify its role as the main facilitator of the dialogue.

Regarding the so-called Mini-Schengen, the idea was born out of necessity, because of the vague European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The initiative was started by Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania in 2019. It was conceived to operate as a substitute to the European single market and to allow free movement of people, goods, capital and services. Its misleading title suggests that it is a copy of the real Schengen

treaty. The sole interest behind the concept of Mini-Schengen is the attempt to stabilize the eroding economies in the region, especially in Serbia, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia.

Through the Washington agreement the US may be in the position to force the participants into cooperating within the Mini-Schengen. While the EU has taken a passive stance, and a possible, but uncertain EU membership has lost its glance, the US, that has pacified the Serbian-Kosovo war by the so-called NATO “humanitarian intervention“ in 1999, has taken the lead. Therefore, the EU tries to get a grip on what its interests in Kosovo are - democracy or stabilocracy. There is undoubtedly one common geopolitical interest both global players share in the region, namely to round off the Euro-Atlantic integration process before Russia or China secure a foothold there and offer a better alternative to the Western Balkan countries.

## **PS: Rethinking instead of business as usual – Recommendations**

1. **Functionality and professionalism have to come back on the agenda**  
Currently, a vast number of publications and papers about the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue mostly offers two dimensions: utopian idealism or mere publications out of some obligation. To create realistic approaches in order to resolve the Kosovo question, the discourse should shift from this distorted situation and the endless circular argumentation kept within. Pragmatism is strongly connected with functionality in questions of nation building, and this means we have to face the truth: in its current setting, Kosovo will not become a functional state in the foreseeable future, if the powers which created it will stubbornly preserve the status quo.
2. **Reactivate reciprocity**  
Reciprocity is a quite probate leverage in international affairs. It should be reintroduced by the ones who are really able to change the game, the powers that have influence in the region. It is a classic game of gaining something for giving up something else, and it is the only method that could motivate Belgrade and Pristina to really make concessions. This principle should also be applied vice versa: non-compliance leads to a certain loss in some field. A good example for a solution could be to mediate and supervise a shared ownership and exploitation of the Gazivoda hydroelectric powerplant. If both sides will agree to such a cooperation, the EU could in case of a comprehensive agreement take care of a modernization of the equipment and infrastructure of the site.
3. **No empty words: stick to the treaties, hold your word, implement rules**  
International relations can only be handled if a party is acting from of a position of thoroughness, determination and strength - all of what the EU lacked in the last years. Instead of calling the implementation of punitive customs by the Kosovar side a violation of the CEFTA treaty as what it is, and act with sanctions, the EU was not able to even comment the situation properly. This gives more radical elements in the domestic politics of Kosovo and Serbia, as well as third players carte blanche to do whatever they please in the region – because they know that the EU will, beside of words of “harsh condemnation”, be idle and do nothing.  
The alternative needs more effort, commitment and expertise as well as the allocation of more resources. An example of how to act in this direction is rather easy to provide. Future violations of international agreements have to be sanctioned by Brussels. There is a vast set that is available to issue pressure on both Belgrade and Pristina: cutting of funds, deceleration of technology transfers, refusing visa liberation, freezing bank accounts of political leaders abroad.

#### 4. No comforting of local autocratic rulers

Serbian as well as Kosovar leaders are prone to abuse international conferences and summits, to which they were invited by Western countries, to emphasize a picture of credibility, recognition and legitimacy of themselves. This creates a certain toxicity in international relations of those countries. Despite the fact that it is well known that all of the “stabilocrats” in the region are very repressively ruling their citizens, and do not adhere to democratic principles like the rule of law or freedom of media, they can constantly refer to these public occurrences as a form of proof of their international appreciation and acceptance. Since leading parties and figures in the region depend on funding from the EU; cuts in this area would maybe lead first to some pathetic statements from the region but soon would cause compliance.

### PPS: Unpopular opinion: reconsideration of some ideas

As it is for pragmatism and functionality, the same counts for some ideas for a solution of the Kosovo question. All options have to be on the table, as long as they could lead to a significant improvement for the living conditions of the population living in the area. As an example, the land swap should be discussed in a broader context in order to find an appropriate solution for the local population, not for ethno-nationalistically oriented decision-making. Kosovo runs the risk to become a failed state, in which a majority group, ethnic Albanians and a large minority group, ethnic Serbians, consider it to be impossible of living together in one nation.

Against the background of this highly controversially debated topic, it is not a recommendation to pursue this course of action. Bringing that up can rather serve to reconsider some possibilities, instead of discarding them from the very beginning, in order to strengthen, or really practicing civic and minority rights and to improve the living conditions for the local population.

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