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Brussels Dialogue in 2019 – a lost year and missed opportunities

The Belgrade-Pristina dialogue on the normalization of relations led within the framework of the Brussels negotiations has been treading water for more than a year. Ever since Pristina imposed 100% taxes on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in November 2018, negotiations have been completely suspended and the two presidents, Aleksandar Vucic and Hashim Thaci, have met only once. Despite numerous messages coming from the EU and the US to abolish the tariffs to continue the dialogue - this has not happened, however the new Kosovo government is expected to move the negotiations from the deadlock. Although the dialogue has not been formally restarted, the regional agreement to reduce roaming charges signed by six countries of the Western Balkans is an important step in normalizing relations. Great strides have also been made with the signing of a letter of intent to open the Belgrade-Pristina air route in January 2020, as well as the recent signing of an agreement on the reconstruction of the railway on the same route. The experts, however, point out that none of the agreements are a product of the Brussels dialogue, whose officials have not had a visible role in the negotiations. The experts also underline that the dialogue still remains questionable.

The Kosovo government, led by the former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, imposed 100% taxes on the import of goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in November 2018 – over, as said at the time, "Serbia's aggressive efforts to delegitimize Kosovo". Two days before the introduction of the tariffs, Kosovo failed to become an INTERPOL member because of Serbia's alleged strong diplomatic activity to prevent this from happening.

In response to the introduction of the tariffs, the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic announced that there would be no further talks within the Brussels dialogue until the tariffs are abolished. This situation has not changed to date, and the dialogue is still undergoing a deep crisis, although more than a year has passed since the last meeting.

The Brussels dialogue itself is viewed by experts in two ways - as a technical dialogue that should facilitate the running of daily life in Kosovo and as a political dialogue that should answer the question of how Belgrade and Pristina will cooperate in the long run.

Ever since the dialogue started in 2013, more than 40 technical agreements have been signed at over 120 meetings, including several revisions of individual agreements. The most famous agreements are those on freedom of movement, which has had the most visible effects when it comes to citizens from Kosovo travelling through central Serbia, the agreements on the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM), telecommunications and the integration of the police and the judiciary. For the first time since the start of the negotiation process, the dialogue was completely suspended, and negotiations on technical and political solutions for Belgrade-Pristina relations have been put aside.

Although there have been no formal negotiations, finding a so-called permanent solution or "comprehensive agreement" is a topic that was first talked about after the introduction of the tariffs. It is also the main topic that marked 2019.

A senior associate of the Berlin Council for Democratization, Bodo Weber said [in an interview with KoSSev](#) in late 2018 that the most realistic scenario would be a standstill in the negotiations until the appointment of Federica Mogherini's successor in the second half of 2019 – which recently took place.

On the other hand, despite the introduction of tariffs, US diplomats spoke optimistically about the "final legally binding agreement" and "the comprehensive agreement" as something that could be achieved quickly.

Philip Kosnett, US Ambassador to Pristina said [in an interview with KoSSev](#) in December 2018 that US President Donald Trump was deeply committed to resolving the Kosovo issue.

"I have not seen the United States demonstrate this commitment, this level of energy and prestige to this issue. I have to say the Trump administration looks at what we call frozen conflicts around the world, and says – 'We need to shake things up. We need to make progress now'."

Kosnett had expectations that a comprehensive agreement would be possible in 2019, but that did not happen.

"I think 2019 has to be the year for a comprehensive agreement. If the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo doesn't get better, it's going to get worse. There is really no option to maintain the status quo."

A similar message was sent a few months later: "A comprehensive, mutually beneficial agreement between Serbia and Kosovo is a way to reach that future, in which the commitment to mutual recognition would play a key role," [US State Under-Secretary, David Hale told KoSSev](#) in March 2019.

The topic of the comprehensive agreement became increasingly present in public discourse, while the specific topics of the Brussels Agreement, such as the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, have been practically forgotten.

[A regional agreement to reduce roaming charges was signed](#) by six Western Balkans countries, including Kosovo, in Belgrade in April 2019. This agreement was interpreted as a positive step in normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina, although the agreement was not part of dialogue but a regional initiative.

At the time when the negotiations were practically frozen, under an initiative supported by Germany, presidents Vucic and Thaci met for the first time at the Berlin summit in April 2019. However, the meeting was not successful.

"We had only one condition for the continuation of dialogue - for tariffs to be revoked, but the Albanians said that we must recognize Kosovo," the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic said after a Western Balkans summit.

At that point, analysts pointed out that the dialogue had undergone the greatest crisis in six years since the Brussels talks started, that the topic of negotiations had been replaced by topics such as ethnic division, and Belgrade and Pristina political leaders are [doing everything to avoid the implementation](#) of the Brussels Agreement.

By the summer of 2019, except for occasional biting comments in the media, the EU had failed to return the dialogue to the negotiation table.

Kosovo's former Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj said [in an interview with KoSSev](#) in early July that there would be no returning to the negotiating table until a clear dialogue framework was established, the outcome of which would be recognition of Kosovo's independence and that taxes would remain in place for as long as he is the prime minister. Two weeks after the interview, Haradinaj resigned after being called for an interview in The Hague in the capacity of a suspect. It was clear at that time that there would be no restarting of the dialogue until a new Kosovo government was formed.

The US interest in removing the dialogue from its deadlock became evident in the second half of 2019 when [Matthew Palmer was appointed Special Representative](#) for the Western Balkans in late August, while President Trump appointed another diplomat, the US Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell as the Special Envoy for the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina in October.

The first concrete results of these appointments were observed in January 2020, when a letter of intent to reestablish a Belgrade-Pristina flight route was suddenly signed at the US Embassy in Berlin, in the presence of US Ambassador and Donald Trump's Special Envoy for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, Richard Grenell.

Less than a month after this agreement was made, following the formal establishment of the new Kosovo government headed by Albin Kurti, another US-mediated agreement to facilitate road traffic between Belgrade and Pristina was signed.

Despite Kurti's announcement that he would take over the negotiations, the signing of the new agreement in mid-February 2020 was attended by old negotiators, the two presidents Vucic and Thaci. Agreements on the reconstruction of the Pristina-Nis railway connection and the construction of the Belgrade-Pristina highway were signed, this time in Munich.

Although it was one of the first meetings between the two presidents after nearly a year of blocked dialogue, analysts point out that the reached agreements are not the product of talks in Brussels, and that one should not forget that negotiations continue to tread water and that the EU is expected to once again bring the two sides to the negotiating table. They also emphasized that the dialogue teams on both sides were virtually disbanded in the previous period, which created a major problem in the implementation of agreements reached in the field, monitoring and solving practical problems.

The idea for the EU to appoint a special envoy for the Balkans, who would continue to lead the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, was proposed as one of the ways to resume the Brussels dialogue. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell informed

Prime Minister Kurti in March that he had [proposed Miroslav Lajčák](#), Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, as EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the Western Balkans.

The taxes on goods from Serbia and BiH remained the main stumbling block for the resumption of dialogue.

Prime Minister Kurti announced at the end of February that taxes on imports of raw materials from Serbia and BiH [could be abolished starting from March 15th](#), with plans to revoke taxes on all products on April 1st, should Serbia terminate its campaign for Kosovo recognition withdrawal. The taxes on raw materials were not revoked because, as Kurti explained, the lack of a common position on the issue with his coalition partner, the LDK party. At a March 20th session, which was held remotely, Kurti's government adopted a proposal to abolish the tax on raw materials. The decision was made after the relations between coalition partners were already significantly damaged due to differences of opinion on several issues - the need to obey the US request to immediately and completely abolish the tariffs and the necessity to introduce a state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic. According to a new decision by the Kosovo government, which came into force on March 21st, the taxes will be completely abolished on April 1st - under the previously set conditions. Taking into account the instability of the ruling coalition, with the LDK collecting votes for a no-confidence motion against the government of its coalition partner, the question is whether the new Kosovo government will still be in power by the time this decision is implemented.

The delimitation idea with no support and a clear plan

The delimitation, border adjustment or land swap idea - which started trending during the summer of 2018 - has slowly disappeared from the 2019 agenda.

Analysts in Serbia and Kosovo interpret the topic of delimitation as a blow that killed the Brussels Dialogue and did not contribute to its final solution:

“The idea of partition is not a continuation or a logical conclusion of the Brussels Agreement, but it is its executioner. The Brussels Agreement is an abandoned concept, and the damage done to this process is irreparable,” a political analyst from North Mitrovica, [Miodrag Marinkovic told KoSsev](#).

It was never formally announced exactly what partition, delimitation or border adjustment implied, nor was it made clear whether it was an official proposal by the two sides leading the dialogue.

On the Serbian side, delimitation stood for the partition of Kosovo under which the north of Kosovo, where four Serb-majority municipalities are located, would belong to Serbia, while in Kosovo, the delimitation included the joining of the Presevo Valley with the eventual annexation of one part of the north to Serbia.

[The expert public had a divided stance](#) on the partition idea. On the one hand, some opposed the idea because they believed that this scenario would weaken the Kosovo Serb community, which would lose the constitutional rights it is currently guaranteed, resulting in the expedited emigration of over 70,000 Serbs south of the Ibar River. Although there would be no organized emigration, Serbs who would

remain in Kosovo after the partition would be pressured not only to integrate but to assimilate, some experts pointed out.

Proponents of the partition idea, on the other hand, stressed that the Serb community should have the right to declare where it wants to live, as this right was given to the Albanian population, emphasizing that the partition would prevent the Serbs from leaving Kosovo in droves – a practice which has been dominant in recent years.

Kosovo analysts pointed out that partition - if it were to include Kosovo losing Mitrovica in the north - would be almost impossible for Albanians in Kosovo. They emphasized that the delimitation is thus a very dangerous and bad solution, adding that such a solution is better than no solution.

The support for this idea as some kind of compensation to Serbia for losing Kosovo [could be detected in the public statements](#) of President Vucic, Foreign Minister, Ivica Dacic and Defense Minister, Aleksandar Vulin. And while the delimitation idea did not divide the ruling coalition in Serbia, in Kosovo's political scene there was a visible discord between the president and the prime minister precisely on this issue. Prime Minister Haradinaj has repeatedly said that his initiative to introduce taxes on goods from Serbia [prevented the idea of Kosovo's partition](#), arguing that the trio - [Vucic, Thaci and Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama](#) are standing behind this idea.

"Serbia asked for 950 kilometers. The topic of partition is no longer on the table, things have developed beyond that. Vucic still uses partition. They are doing their job," [Haradinaj said](#) in September 2019.

Kosovo's new Prime Minister, Albin Kurti also opposes the idea. Immediately after his appointment in February this year, he made it clear that any talk of a land swap was no longer a topic for discussion and negotiation. He said the same after winning the elections.

"There is no dialogue on borders. These are my views. Vucic needs to understand once again what the coming of Self-determination into power means. And I believe he knows it very well," [Kurti said](#) in October 2019.

Ten days later, Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic said that there will be no recognition of Kosovo within its present borders and that the EU's idea was a model of an agreement between the two German states, without formal recognition by Belgrade.

"Pristina has to abolish the tariffs and then we should discuss all things without preconditions. However, if before the possible dialogue one says 'we are not talking about territories, we are not talking about autonomy for the north,' then what should we talk about? Under these conditions, there are no negotiations," [Vucic said](#).

The idea of ethnic delimitation as the only possible solution was in general negatively received among the international public from the very beginning - with Germany at the forefront. Similar messages were sent throughout 2019.

“We, along with others, don’t believe that is a positive way forward. But, clearly, we are going to see how the negotiations proceed within certain parameters,” the new British Ambassador, Nicholas Abbott [told KoSSev in September 2019](#) when asked if Britain supports the delimitation idea. [The Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko](#) sent a similar message, saying that Russia was not in favor of the partition of Kosovo.

On the other hand, US diplomats did not share such a disparaging view of the partition or delimitation idea.

As a special envoy, Richard Grenell was perceived by analysts as [a person who would support the idea of a land swap](#) as a way to resolve the issue of Kosovo's status as soon as possible, as well as [someone who could persuade Germany to support the idea](#).

The Chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz also gave his support to this idea in 2019.

“Our position is clear: we support anything the two parties agree, including a possible modification of the border, if that ultimately leads to a comprehensive solution that would bring about greater stability. The goal must be to ensure that all open issues are resolved through dialogue,” [Kurz explained](#).

The US ambassador to Pristina, Philip Kosnett, however, said [in an interview with KoSSev](#) in December 2019 that while the idea of partition may not have been completely rejected, it does not have enough support to be implemented.

“If they want to talk about that our view is that the negotiators should not be prohibited from talking about that. But that word ‘partition’ you’re using is a very dramatic word. I simply don’t see any support for partition... for a land swap, for an exchange of populations, for that sort of grand, sweeping change – I don’t see any support for that.”

What do citizens think about the dialogue?

Experts point out that the Brussels dialogue did not meet its primary objective - normalization of Serb-Albanian relations and that its 2019 deadlock exacerbated the strained relations between the two nations.

The majority believe that Serb-Albanian relations are at their lowest point ever since the Brussels negotiation process started six years ago.

[A public opinion poll conducted in 2019](#) by the Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives revealed that 62% of Serbian citizens are not familiar with the details of the Brussels dialogue. When asked about their position on the dialogue, almost 56% respondents said that negotiations would not contribute to the improvement of relations between Serbs and Albanians, 57% disagreed with the idea that Serbs and Albanians have the same rights in Kosovo, while according to 69% of respondents, recognition of Kosovo as an independent state would be a betrayal of national interests.

The lack of openness of Serbian citizens to the idea for Serbia to recognize Kosovo in some form in order to reach a final solution to the problem is evident in the fact that only 36% of them would support the agreement which would include Serbia recognizing Kosovo in exchange for four northern municipalities, the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities in the south and the extraterritoriality of the monasteries of the Serbian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, 32% of citizens would vote in the referendum for an agreement with which Serbia would not recognize Kosovo, instead, it would accept Kosovo's membership in the UN in exchange for the ASM. The land swap which would include exchanging the four northern municipalities for parts of the municipalities of Presevo and Bujanovac would be acceptable for 15% of respondents.

The survey shows that none of the offered scenarios had a majority support of Serbian citizens.

The author of this survey, an associate at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade, Nikola Jovic said in an interview with KoSsev that [75% of Serbian citizens have a negative stance](#) on the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue because they see it as a path toward the recognition of Kosovo's independence.

On the other hand, a poll of Kosovo citizens' views on the dialogue conducted by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies showed that 7% of Kosovo citizens see Serbia as one of the top three risks to the country's national security, while 78% of citizens believe that the partition of Kosovo would present an internal risk to national security. Nearly 90% of Kosovo citizens perceive Serbia as a detrimental influence on Kosovo's foreign policy, while 97% of Albanians see Serbia as harmful.

The survey found that 48.42% of Kosovo citizens believe that dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia should continue and that an agreement should be reached, while 14.44% of citizens oppose the continuation of dialogue, and almost 9% of citizens believe that dialogue should continue until Serbia recognized Kosovo.

Still, the negative perception between the two peoples did not prevent the cooperation between Serbs and Albanians in some cities in Kosovo in solving common problems. The most striking example of this practice in 2019 was the [joint protests by the citizens of Strpce](#) against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the Shar Mountain Rivers.

The role of the media can be crucial to the success of the dialogue

Although there was no dialogue in 2019, the experts indicate that the media in Serbia, especially the tabloids, have largely negatively affected the reconciliation of the two nations by using hate speech when reporting on Kosovo.

In the government-backed tabloid media, this narrative was promoted via news with the following headlines: "Shiptars are bullying! Shiptar torture! Shiptars arresting Serbs again! Shiptar's abnormal dealings! Shiptars are bullying Serbs – provoking bloody conflicts! Shiptars are 'cutting off the heads' of the Serbs! Liar, liar, Shiptar pants on fire!"

As experts point out that in recent years government-backed media in Serbia have played a key role in creating an anti-Albanian narrative among citizens.

“The emotional attitude towards Kosovo is constantly reinforced in the media controlled by Vucic’s propaganda machinery. This is not a positive, emotional discourse presented in the narrative – Kosovo is the heart of Serbia. On the contrary, it is a narrative that is riddled with hatred and intolerance towards Albanians. The newly created narrative is regressive, inhumane, and fundamentally anti-Albanian,” an associate at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade, Nikola Jovic [wrote in an opinion piece for KoSsev](#).

This tendency of the media is fundamentally contrary to the official messages sent by Serbian President Vucic, who publically underlines that an agreement must be reached and that a compromise must be reached, Jovic also said.

According to the opinion poll conducted by the Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives, the government-backed media are the ones with the most influence on public opinion in Serbia. The experts, therefore, point out that the media can be the key to the success of future negotiations if the anti-Albanian narrative were to turn into reporting on the support for dialogue and further negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina.

Experts believe the role of the media is crucial for the future of dialogue when it comes to the Serbian citizens because neutral reporting or reporting of government-backed media that supports the idea of reaching an agreement with Pristina in a period from 6 months to two years could lead to the signing of an agreement which the majority of citizens would support.