



Weekly Briefing

Serbia Political briefing:

Kosovo and Metohija - a new dynamics of the negotiation process

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Kosovo and Metohija - a new dynamics of the negotiation process

The most important political topic in July and August were proposed solutions within the negotiation process between Belgrade and Pristina, which had negative odium in numerous actors of the international community, representatives of the opposition and the Serbian Orthodox Church. This phase of the dialogue was marked with more concrete solutions, but also contradictory and vague statements by officials. Regarding the process of European integration major topic was harmonization of the constitutional amendments with the opinion of the Venice Commission.

In early July, Hashim Thaci made a statement in which he highlighted demand for direct participation of the United States in the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. Shortly after this statement, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic's replied stressing that in the case of USA participation in negotiations, the same status must be secured to other actors, such as Russia and China. On this matter, the European Foreign Service stated that the European Union opposes changing the format of the dialogue, because the participation of the US as a new actor would lead to Russia's engagement in dialogue, which would significantly affect the speed and efficiency of the entire process.

Speaking about the method of implementation of the agreement on Kosovo and Metohija, President of Serbia stated on July 8th that any solution reached during the negotiations must be confirmed in a referendum. After the completion of the round of negotiations on July 18th, the parties pointed to some progress, although the final solution has not yet been reached. There are great expectations about the next round of negotiations scheduled for early September.

The most important political issue in the past period was the possibility of delimitation. Although this proposal was initiated in media, according to the claims of certain officials, it was also a part of the negotiations between

Belgrade and Pristina. Ivica Dacic confirmed that demarcation is one of the ideas of resolving the Kosovo issue, which does not necessarily have to be realized. The demarcation essentially means the exchange of territory, in which according to various variants four or two (Leposavic and Zubin Potok) of the municipalities of the north of Kosovo and Metohija should belong to Serbia, while the Presevo Valley (Bujanovac, Presevo and certain solutions of Medvedja where the Albanians are not the majority population) belonged to Kosovo. This proposal led to the mobilization and articulation of the demands of Albanian political representatives in the Presevo Valley, whose leaders at a meeting of representatives of all Albanian political parties on July 14th requested that the status issue of the region should be raised during the negotiation process.

Statements by senior officials and actors in the negotiating process during the summer were, despite their commitment to dialogue and compromise, extremely vague and ambiguous. The Serbian President stresses that he does not believe in the possibility of realizing the idea of ethnic separation between Serbs and Albanians, while Pristina officials have repeatedly denied the possibility of implementing this solution, stressing the demand for a referendum in the Presevo Valley and the subsequent merging of this area with Kosovo. Nevertheless, Hashim Thaçi in subsequent statements mitigates the stance by pointing out that he does not support demarcation, but that he supports a peaceful separation.

The US Embassy in Pristina supported the negotiating process, appealing to the creativity and flexibility of negotiating parties. Shortly thereafter, Angela Merkel made a clear and categorical view of the exchange of territories as unacceptable idea for resolving the Kosovo problem. Great Britain's officials also made a negative stance, stating that such a solution would have a destabilizing effect on other Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Marija Zakharova stressed during a visit to

Serbia that Russia is committed to resolving the Kosovo issue solely in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

The strongest opposition to the proposed solution came from the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was repeated by the Message of the Holy Assembly of Bishops on Kosovo and Metohija. Particularly strong position was taken by the Eparchy of Raska-Prizren, led by Bishop Theodosius and the monk of the Visoki Decani monastery Sava Janjic. Against this decision were representatives of the newly formed opposition bloc of the Alliance for Serbia, but also the opposition in the Kosovo parliament, led by the Self-Determination Movement.

In this period, the issue of the draft of the Statute of the Community of Serb Municipalities for the first time during the negotiation process was found in the second plan, while the perspective of its realization is still not visible. After the boycott, political representatives of Serbs organized in the Serbian list returned to the Assembly of Kosovo on July 13th.

At the beginning of August, a modified proposal of the delimitation introduced by former High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Wolfgang Petritsch, appeared. He proposes a “cosmetic correction”, which involves the exchange of villages inhabited by Albanians around Bujanovac for villages inhabited by Serbs around Kosovska Mitrovica. Following this statement, the possibility of exchanging territories has been established as an increasingly realistic solution to the Kosovo issue.

Nevertheless, in mid-August, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said he did not see the possibility of concluding a general binding agreement with Pristina in the next three months, while Hashim Thaci made a much more conciliatory stance on the possibility of exchanging territories. However, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic denied the possibility of border correction, emphasizing the importance of Resolution 1244. In late August, Aleksandar Vucic said that negotiating parties were not close to the solution to the Kosovo issue.

During July and August period, the Pristina authorities again announced the creation of the Kosovo Army and entry into NATO, while the US approved \$ 10 million in aid to the Kosovo Security Force. During this period, series of arrests of political representatives of Serbs and other persons of Serb ethnicity in Kosovo and Metohija were recorded, due to alleged connection with the security structures of Serbia.

Serious political messages arrived at the end of July from the Raska region (Sandžak). Bosniak National Assembly leader Sulejman Ugljanin stressed that due to alleged failure to respect minority rights of Bosniaks by Serbia, he defines political struggle aimed at achieving the autonomy of this region.

By the end of July, a 30-point program was presented, which makes the platform of the coalition in the formation called the Alliance for Serbia. The aim of this coalition is to gather a broad block of opposition parties. This ideologically heterogeneous political grouping is mostly made up of political parties formed by the dissolution of the Democratic Party, with the participation of the right-wing Movement of the Dveri. The greater influence of the state in the economy, fair and honest elections, democratic society and the advocacy of the referendum and Resolution 1244 as the basis for resolving the issue of Kosovo and Metohija represent the key political goals of this coalition.

The talks between Belgrade and Pristina were reverberated in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina. President Milorad Dodik said that, in case of Kosovo's request for a chair in United Nation, the Republika Srpska will launch the same procedure, thus linking these two cases. A different attitude was expressed by the Serb representative in the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mladen Ivanic, who pointed out that there was no basis for connecting the Kosovo and Republika Srpska cases.

A special political interest in Serbia caused a decision to plan the abolition of border crossings between Kosovo and Albania from January 1, 2019, which was seen as another step in the creation of Greater Albania.

In the process of European integration, Lithuania blocked Serbia in the opening of Chapter 31 (Common Foreign and Security Policy) because of its relations with the Russian Federation.

Minister of Justice, Nela Kuburovic announced that an altered version of the constitutional reforms in the field of justice will be presented. Alteration was made along with the opinion of the Venice Commission. To remind, major objection is the method of election of members of the High Judicial Council.

Conclusion

The negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina entered are in a new, more dynamic phase, characterized by more concrete solutions to the Kosovo issue. However, it is obvious that the views of the two sides collide, so the resolution of this issue will be postponed for the next period. In addition, the way of implementing a potential solution to the Kosovo issue remains an enigma. Harmonization of constitutional amendments on the judiciary with the opinion of the Venice Commission is a key topic in the process of European integration.