



Weekly Briefing

Serbia external relations briefing:

SERBIAN FOREIGN RELATIONS FEBRUARY 2020 KEY ISSUES

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Although the beginning of the year is full with events, two major processes are the most relevant for the government policy of Serbia. One is relations with the secessionist Pristina authorities and another is the situation in Montenegro. Both things are important for the policy of the government and for the near future of Serbia. What is the character of these events?

Belgrade and Pristina

Western sponsored (EU+USA) Dialogue of Belgrade and Priština, seems to be restarted under U.S. auspices after long brake provoked by Pristina. At the sidelines of the Munich security conference on February 14th, with the mediation of the US President Donald Trump's envoy in the talks, Richard Grenell, representatives from Belgrade and Pristina signed new deal, this time on the reopening of the railroad connection and on the construction of the motorway from Pristina to Nis (city in south-eastern Serbia). This came as a result of previous talks in Belgrade between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Mr. Grenell on January 24th 2020, and later in Berlin. Still this was more diplomatic achievement as it is a MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) just like the one signed on January 21 on direct flights from Belgrade to Pristina and vice-versa, again with mediation of U.S. President envoy, Mr. Grenell.

The dialogue started as technical process led by heads of special units in Belgrade and in Pristina. However, since 2012 quality of representatives has changed, and the process became 'political' as Prime Minister of Serbia (Ivica Dačić) and head of local government in Pristina were heading the talks. This change occurred under the supervision of U.S. State Secretary Hillary Clinton. What changed was also the level of EU mediator. Until then it was special envoy Robert Cooper, but since 30th October 2012 it was EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, first Catherine Ashton and later Federica Mogherini. Already then (in 2012) motorway between Pristina and Niš was announced. This change of the level of participants in dialogue was prelude for Brussels agreement in 2013, that definitely changed the framework of negotiations.

However, this latest meeting happened without previous accords among Kosovo Albanians. At least new so-called Prime Minister in Pristina Albin Kurti (born as Kurtovic) and Head of the Albanian parliament in Kosovo, expressed their hesitation to agree with this sort of

accords as they did not consult with Hashim Thaci (who is recognized by some countries as president of Kosovo).

Context of revival of Belgrade-Pristina talks

Several perspectives or contexts in which this occurs should be examined:

1. *U.S. and EU relations*: This process temporarily stopped in November 2018 after Pristina decided to tax goods from central Serbia because it was prevented to become member of INTERPOL. As with the transformation of technical into political dialogue, U.S. assistance and mediation again seems to resuscitate the talks. This happens in atmosphere of announced U.S. presidential elections where any success (even foreign) may be used for a campaign, and in wider effort of U.S. to impede eventual cohesion of EU. Showing success sends diplomatic message that even in the Balkans Washington can deliver when Brussels can't. Furthermore, Americans proved to have decisive role in southern Balkans and among Albanians in general.

2. *Regional Balkan politics*: Leaders of Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia in fall 2019 promoted an idea nicknamed Mini Schengen, or zone of free movement for people and goods in this non EU countries. Later at the mini summit in Tirana, Albania, Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović stated that Montenegro is also open for that idea. Bosnia and Herzegovina and according to the interpretation of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, also Pristina could join. The MoU on transport infrastructure fits into this initiative as it facilitates movements.

3. *Serbian politics*: Kosovo talks are results of the process started with NATO occupation of Serbian southern province Kosovo and Metohija in 1999. Long pressures of the West on Serbia with EU conditionality policy on Belgrade officials who always receive offer to have public support for EU integrations if they fulfil set of issues reserved only for Serbia (policy of double standards). Among them is the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue which facilitates local authorities in Kosovo to gain more and more attributes usually reserved for a nation state (like customs, membership in international organisations, *de facto* border...). Serbia officially uses these talks for two aims: 1) to arrange better protection of Serbs and other non-Albanians in the province, and of their cultural heritage, in particular for Serbian orthodox monasteries, and 2) in order to continue the long path of EU integrations.

This latest accord under the U.S. patronage was not needed for the Serbian President Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party ahead of parliamentary election scheduled for April 2020. Issue of Kosovo and Metohija is deeply related to Serbian identity, its culture and politics. Every politician that would allow or recognize the separatist entity risks losing support in electorate. Thus, it is clearly that this latest move was a result of at least two pressures, by USA and by Germany on Serbia. Still, Vučić managed to present this as another success, and diplomatically indeed obtained for Serbia only to have signed Memorandum, and not an agreement. Hashim Thaci played as U.S. ally and political partner of Vučić.

Montenegro and religious manifestations

The same day leaders of Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia gathered for meeting in Tirana (21st December 2019), Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (SOCiM) organised gathering and public prayer in the city of Nikšić, in front of saint relics. This manifestation was organised in order to express protest against then announced Montenegrin troubled *Law on religious liberties*. Six days later, in early hours of 27th December, amid motions of opposition parties and protests, ruling majority adopted controversial and unprecedented law that allows for the state to confiscate churches, land and other real-estates belonging to Churches and other religious communities. Still, the Roman Catholic Church is already protected through Concordat, or *Base Agreement* between Montenegro and Holy See, signed on 24 June 2011 and ratified on 29th May 2012. Thus it was clear from the start that the Law is aimed against Serbian Orthodox Church that for long is the greatest obstacle to local regime policy of building new Montenegrin identity based on anti-Serb stance. Although official Podgorica nurtures policy against Serbs and promoted also invention of new language (Montenegrin in 2007), its strongman and leader for already more than three decades, Milo Đukanović is good personal partner of Aleksandar Vučić. This fact explains lack of reactions of Serbia before and even in recent months when Montenegro pursues policies not only against interests of Serbia but against Serbian identity in general.

Character of religious processions

In the day when controversial law was adopted people started to gather in religious processions. In the start some manifestations had a political character. But in matter of days SOCiM took over and until today controls processions. There are no any pleas except for one

that is for Government and ruling majority to give up on controversial law. These forms of religious manifestations organised every Thursday and Sunday afternoon breaks records in numbers and according to multiple sources already exceeds one third of population of Montenegro, if not 40 percent, without sign of fatigue.

History of Serbian people and for that matter also of Montenegro has been characterized many times with Serbian Orthodox Church acting as representative of people (Serbian patriarch inside Ottoman Empire) either as leader (Montenegrin bishop as theocratic ruler).

Possible repercussions for the Serbian policy

Both processes, Dialogue of Belgrade and Pristina that somehow restarted under the mediation of U.S. and the religious processions in Montenegro have effects on Serbian foreign policy. Serbian president several times in past years repeated that tough decisions lie ahead of country. But, it is clear that West support for the elections that will be held in April this year are because there are expectations that Serbia will continue to support building of Kosovo institutions and gaining prerogatives akin to sovereign state. If government is indeed thinking to draw such unpopular move, strength that SOCiM showed against regime of Milo Đukanović could alleviate pressure from the West on Vučić, or could harm his position as Montenegro example might be repeated in Serbia in case of substantial recognition of Kosovo as a state by official Belgrade.