

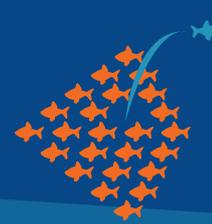
NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVE

A SHORT-LIVED PROMISE - GOVERNMENT FALLOUT AND DIALOGUE WITH BELGRADE AMID COVID-19 CRISIS

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemics has brought Kosovo to an unprecedented crisis. Except the pandemics, Kosovo was also faced with crisis of political leadership and failure of institutional leaders to work cooperatively on fighting the outbreak of corona virus. 25th March vote of no confidence brought down Albin Kurti's government after only 50 days in power, making it the shortest-lived government in Kosovo's history. Disagreements over the removal of 100% tariffs, as well as differences over the approach to fighting pandemics and necessity to impose a state of emergency, have proven to be difficult for coalition parties to overcome. Kosovo also faces the first instance of divergent views of the key international partners on the way forward in Belgrade – Pristina dialogue, particularly between the U.S. and EU. A group of think tanks and civil society experts from Pristina, North Mitrovica and Belgrade met online to discuss the effect of COVID-19 on Kosovo and its influence on Kosovo politics and Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

FIGHTING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Government fallout amid pandemic and intra-institutional brawl over imposing a state of emergency was deemed by participants as "irresponsible and outrageous move" since Kosovo just started to grasp the crisis. President Thaci's attempt to decree state of emergency in collusion with LDK leadership, and strip the power away from the government, managed to sow discord among coalition partners and eventually brought the government down. Until the new government is elected, outgoing government will continue to fulfill its duties. Initial measures that Kosovo government introduced to fight COVID-19 pandemics were assessed as measured and timely, considering the ability of health system to cope with overload of cases. Kosovo was among the first in the region to introduce closure of schools and non-essential businesses, as well as to quarantine areas with higher number of infected residents. On 24 March, the government also restricted movements for the citizens, which was since marked unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Still, the outgoing government continued to impose more restricting measures despite the decision of the court. Our interlocutors criticized such a decision and warned of "Kurti's authoritarian tendencies." Government was also faced with criticism of failing to ensure that all measures taken by central institutions to fight the pandemic are implemented throughout Kosovo, particularly in areas with Kosovo Serb majority. The opposition accused it of endangering Kosovo's sovereignty by coordinating prevention measures in K-Serb majority areas with Belgrade, such as allowing unhindered movement of doctors and medical staff and coordinating actions in Serb majority municipalities with local mayors. Discussants lauded coordination between Belgrade and Pristina in fighting COVID-19 and the fact that so far, political leaders in Belgrade and Pristina mostly understood the gravity of the situation and did not increase tensions. Participants also opined that in case of increased load of cases, the outgoing government would be under additional strain to succumb to President Thaci's pressure and agree on imposing a state of emergency.



NEW GOVERNMENT OR PROLONGED IMPASSE?

Since the vote of no confidence, the strategy of VV was to prolong the reconfiguration of power and to keep outgoing government at the helm during the pandemics and until new elections could be held safely. VV is unexpectedly empowered by the 2014 Constitutional Court ruling, according to which President is obliged to address the largest political party or entity in the Assembly to propose a candidate for Prime Minister. On 2 April, President Thaci called on VV to present the name of Prime Minister nominee in the "reasonable time." However, VV is stalling and is reluctant to go ahead and provide the name of the PM candidate as it would then face a 15-days deadline for the government to be elected. In case that President Thaci decides to circumvent VV, and call on LDK as a second-largest party to nominate PM candidate, VV will most likely seek the opinion of Constitutional Court on the legality of such decision, counting on the precedent nature of 2014 court decision. LDK appears to be ready to reap the benefit of its decision to initiate a motion of no confidence and jump on the opportunity to set up the new governing coalition with AAK, NISMA, SL, and other non-majority community parties, with the support from the PDK. Such government would have a substantial majority, and with PDK, even a clear 2/3 majority needed for imposing the most significant legal and political changes. LDK is immersed in internal disagreements between the "old guard" around party leader Isa Mustafa and "younger challengers," such as Speaker of Assembly Vjosa Osmani, who opposed bringing it government down. However, LDK General Council overwhelmingly supported its party leader in accepting a mandate to form the new government in case such opportunity arises. Our interlocutors mostly agree that eventually, President Thaci will find a way to circumvent VV's hindrance to the establishment of the new government. Still, in their view, VV will come out empowered in the long run, as it will be able to capitalize on playing the "victimization card." VV will present its eventual downfall as a struggle between new incorruptible leaders emanated in VV and old corrupt elite from LDK, PDK, AAK, and NISMA. Some of the political analysts from Pristina opined that "old guard" LDK leadership was not feeling comfortable in coalition with VV. The more extended coalition life was, the more potent VV would have attracted traditional LDK voters and render LDK useless in the future and dommed to a margin of political life. Thus, LDK found Kurti's conflict with the U.S. and Ambassador Grenell over unconditional removal of 100% tariff, as well as disagreement on the imposing of the state of emergency, a perfect excuse to bring the government down.

The opposing views on the motion of no-confidence between the U.S. and key European states manifest the strongest division so far seen among the QUINT over critical political developments in Kosovo. According to our participants, VV led government was perceived as a spoiler by the U.S. administration and particularly Ambassador Richard Grenell. Grenell decided to discipline Kurti for not succumbing to pressure and being uncooperative in the U.S. attempt to come up with a swift agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. On the other hand, analysts from Belgrade found U.S. pressure on Pristina to unconditionally lift the tariffs principled and a result of the long-overdue need to bring the sides back to the table.



BELGRADE-PRISTINA DIALOGUE – SHOCK DOCTRINE OR EXTENDED LIMBO?

The rift between the U.S. and Europeans in its policies toward Pristina indicates potential difficulties for the next phase of Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Our analysts agree that if international actors remain unable to develop a more unified stance on the final phase of the process it will be hard to reach any agreement. Meanwhile, according to participants from Pristina, U.S. administration tacit support for the vote of no confidence signals that some understanding on the way forward is reached between Presidents Vučić and President Thaci during their visit to Washington D.C. in early March. Most participants acknowledge that such an agreement might include some territorial adjustment. However, even if Ambassador Grenell intended to score a personal victory and present it as President Trump's achievement, COVID-19 pandemics has further compressed an already short timeframe for agreement to be reached before U. S. Presidential elections take place in November. Before any substantial meeting between the two sides will take place, the new government in Pristina will have to be elected, while postponed parliamentary elections in Serbia will happen. President Vučić does not intend to engage in potentially costly dialogue, least likely the agreement before elections are held. According to our analysts in Belgrade, earliest the elections could take place is late June or early July, which would further push the establishment of a new government to late August or early September. Thus, the escalation of coronavirus pandemic might pressure all sides to wait until November and U.S. Presidential elections. Still, the potential loss of President Trump and the election of Joseph Biden in November could change the dynamics entirely and swing the pendulum in Pristina's favor.

However, some participants emphasized the possibility of a "wild card" or a "shock doctrine scenario." According to them, COVID-19 pandemics could pave the way for the agreement as a "big crisis present a great opportunity" for authoritarian leaders to push through certain agreements that would not be as popular in normal circumstances. Such a scenario would be expedited by the fact that in Pristina, we would have a weak government, subordinated to the President, and a strong mandate for President Vučić's party following elections in Serbia. Also, the fact that freedom of movement and freedom of assembly and protest are restricted during COVID-19 could ease up the process as those opposing it would find it hard to raise their voice their disagreements.

Meanwhile, European Council appointed Miroslav Lajčák as EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues signaling the EU's renewed engagement in the Dialogue". Lajčák will support the work of EU High Representative Josep Borrell. His appointment was fiercely criticized by President Thaci, while others in Pristina were varied by the EU approach for having foreign policy leaders from countries who have not recognized Kosovo. Unlike President Thaci, outgoing Prime Minister Kurti welcomed Lajcak's appointment and reaffirmed Kosovo's commitment to relaunching the dialogue with Serbia. He also noted that the dialogue should be mediated by both the EU and the United States. Kurti, who is perceived as "European man" in Pristina, also exchanged letters with French President Emanuel Macron and spoke to German Chancellor Angela Merkel discussing the future of dialogue.



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President Macron promised to increase the role of France in the dialogue, and suggested that France and Germany will organize a Paris Summit under the auspices of the EU devoted to Kosovo-Serbia relations, "as soon as appropriate conditions are created." Our analysts were skeptical about the prospects for quick resumption or success of the EU-facilitated dialogue. In their view, the new EU Envoy will need time to take stock of the agreements reached so far and get fully acquainted with portfolio. Participants also questioned the EU's ability to be creative and push forward a deal that could satisfy Belgrade and Pristina. As the EU leverage was dwindling since "there is no stick and somebody ate the carrot," dialogue seems to have been "void of content" for some time already. The new EU approach would have to be based on a realistic assessment of what it can achieve, considering its constraints with five non-EU recognizers and a diminishing reputation for not meeting commitments.

CONCLUSION

It will take a time between lifting COVID-19 prevention measures in Kosovo and Serbia and resumption of Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Both Kosovo and Serbia, as well as key international partners, will feel the consequences of the crisis long after the outbreak is under control. With a declining economy, increased unemployment, and social inequality, one cannot exclude possible political turmoil, particularly in Kosovo between empowered VV and "old establishment" parties. As Kosovo and Serbia governments scramble to adapt to post-COVID reality, it remains to be seen how much fuel have left for the one final push toward normalization.

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