

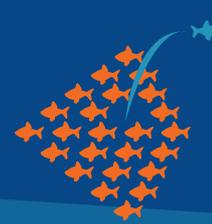
## THE DIPLOMATIC SHUTTLE HAS TAKEN OFF

After almost two years' pause, the EU facilitated dialogue resumed on July 12 with a 'telesummit' for two delegations and EU dignitaries to be followed by a physical discussion in Brussels on July 12 for Serbian President Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Hoti. The disruption of the joint US-EU policy on Kosovo over the last two years has produced a competitive dynamic between the two major powers. It appears that the EU has come out victorious, at least for now. The much anticipated meeting in Washington DC, announced by US Presidential Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations Richard Grenell, fell through the cracks, following the announcement of an indictment against President Thaci and PDK leader Kadri Veseli. KSC announcement and the Washington meeting's cancellation effectively passed the baton into EU's hands. EU's new diplomatic initiative following with a series of meetings that the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, Miroslav Lajčák, held in Pristina and Belgrade paid off. With a new spike of COVID-19 pandemics as well as internal political turmoil in both Kosovo and Serbia, a group of analysts, think-tankers, and civil society activists met to discuss the future of Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

## HOTI'S CRUCIBLE, VUČIĆ'S BOWLING ALONE

The potential indictment confirmation against President Thaci has technically left Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti solely in charge of dialogue with Belgrade. For nine years, Thaci carried the weight of the dialogue on his shoulders, first as Prime Minister and then as President. He was considered as the only politician who had the power and strength to deliver a potentially painful compromise with Belgrade and muster necessary international and internal political supports for implementation. In the last few years, his power was waning, notably since the idea of the land swap, or as Thaci dubbed it "border correction," was introduced in 2018. If the pre-trial judge confirms the indictment, Thaci will be sidelined, especially if he resigns, from Kosovo politics until the trial is over, which could take years. However, if the indictment is not confirmed, Thaci will return in a significant fashion. The pre-trial judge has until 24 October 2020 to confirm the accusations.

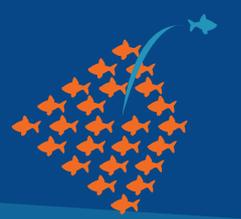
The following months will be PM Hoti's crucible as a leader. He is entering a dialogue with a divided society and a spike of COVID-19 cases following the re-opening. With a VV and an unpredictable PDK, he has to navigate the Kosovo ship with a slim majority in the Assembly and questioned legitimacy. Paradoxically, the indictment against Thaci could affix governing parties with PDK. The parties could decide to establish a new coalition government that will elect a new President, if Thaci resigns, to avoid early elections, where VV is considered in the strongest position to win the majority support of K-Albanian voters. Since he took office, PM Hoti embarked on a quest to build domestic consensus for the continuation of Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. His work has been undermined by vocal opposition from the previously ruling VV. Any success for Hoti has to be based on ensuring collective decision making on the dialogue related issues of main coalition parties, his party leader, Isa Mustafa, AAK's Ramush Haradinaj



and opposition PDK. In an attempt to bring political parties together, the government will push legislation to establish a Committee on Dialogue, which will be composed of all parties. To increase the pool of support, Hoti has met with the Academy of Science and Arts of Kosovo and presented three main principles that will guide the dialogue process: 1) the territorial integrity of Kosovo is non-negotiable; 2) the constitutional order of Kosovo is non-negotiable; and 3) the reached agreement is in line with the Constitution of Kosovo. In terms of objectives, Hoti said the first is a mutual recognition that allows for Kosovo's UN, EU and NATO membership. Hoti added further that an "essential objective" of the dialogue is to repeal UNSC Resolution 1244. He also established a Council of Experts tasked to provide advice to political leaders on the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. As such, he entered the discussion with a relatively clear mandate, but with questionable political backing and political legitimacy.

With a landslide victory of his party in the June parliamentary elections, President Vučić was furnished with the substrate to deliver on an agreement with Pristina as SNS/SPS governing coalition won almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  support. Despite lowering the threshold to lure in some opposition into the parliament, due to boycott of the largest opposition alliance, only one additional party, SPAS, barely managed to enter parliament. According to independent observers and Serbian civil society organizations, elections were marred by irregularities and suspicions of electoral fraud. After years of suppressing the opposition, President Vučić is left bowling alone.

However, when there are no institutional means to channel disappointment, it will be directed in the streets. On 7 July, following President Vučić's announcement of new lockdown measures, after previously were lifted for elections to occur, and following revelations that government lied about the severity of pandemics, protests erupted in Belgrade. The clashes started with protesters targeting institutions, and police responding brutally, exposing the nature of the regime. It appears that the lockdown was just a trigger and that the underlying motives that drove people to the streets are much deeper, depicting a considerable frustration with President Vučić. Protesters include a diverse group ranging from opposition parties and its supporters to civic groups to youth and far-right protesters. While some are concerned about diminishing political freedoms and government handling the COVID-19 crisis, others express disappointment with the Kosovo government's Kosovo policy and called it treasonous. Initially, the unprepared government consolidated. President Vučić tried to frame protests for the Western audience (ahead of Paris meeting and a new round of Brussels facilitated dialogue) as mostly far-right violence and "Russian. " meddling". Such allegations did not fall to fertile ground, as Western media reported mainly about police violence and brutality. President Vučić is facing a difficult period with an increased number of coronavirus cases, a looming economic crisis and mounting international pressure to deliver on Kosovo, as he consolidated power. His gambit to expose weaknesses in his ability to provide on Kosovo front and preserve the status quo, due to internal pressures and far-right protests, might not gain sympathies with key international partners.



## EU AND US IN A DIALOGUE ROLLERCOASTER

Once coordinated, the EU and US engagement in Belgrade-Pristina dialogue bifurcated over the last year into two parallel processes. US involvement shortly altered the balance of power in the dialogue at the cost of the EU. The Appointment of Ambassador Richard Grenell as Special Presidential Envoy for the Serbia-Kosovo peace talks in October 2019 changed the dynamics, as he opened a new diplomatic track for the Belgrade-Pristina talks, resulting in tentative pledges to improve connectivity and transportation infrastructure. Grenell was able to vouch on proximity to the US President, which gave him credibility and clout with Belgrade and Pristina. However, his attempts to bring the sides to the table for more substantive talks were cut short by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers' announcement of indictment against President Thaci. It is questionable whether Ambassador Grenell will give dialogue another try, considering the shortened timeframe ahead of US elections in November. Still, he has recently softened his rhetoric toward the EU-facilitated process, recognizing the EU's primacy on the political front, while suggesting that the US approach will be focused on the economy.

On the other hand, the appointment of an experienced diplomat like Miroslav Lajčak as the Special Representative (EUSR) for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue signaled a renewed effort of EU member states to unify their position and enter a new phase of dialogue. The EU regained its strength with the fallout of 27 June, Washington D. C. meeting, and took the initiative by organizing the Paris Summit on 10 July and the first online meeting between President Vučić and Prime Minister Hoti on 12 July. The sides agreed on the main elements of the process. The new round of dialogue will be organized in Brussels on 16 July. It has to be noted that the EU was able to progress with dialogue as focused US pressure was applied on Pristina to remove the tariffs was made possible with election of the new government at the beginning of June.

However, both Belgrade and Pristina are disillusioned with EU's ability to deliver its part of the bargain, particularly a credible EU enlargement perspective for Serbia and at least visa liberalization for Kosovo. Before any serious dialogue efforts are made, EU would have to address its contested incentive structure. That is one of the reasons why US was able to re-insert itself in the dialogue as a seemingly more trusted broker whom Kosovo believes. Pristina is disillusioned with the way that dialogue with Belgrade is progressing, as there was no sense that Kosovo can count that process will end with international recognition. At the same time, there was a sense of injustice, as Belgrade was still making progress in the EU integration process. The majority of experts and pundits agree that EU and the US would have to coordinate their positions if they want a successful conclusion of the dialogue. The latest softening of Ambassador Grenell's rhetoric is promising his rejection of land swap idea particularly.



NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVE

## BACK TO BASICS

EUSR Lajčak's mandate is to achieve a comprehensive agreement on the normalization of relations through signing a legally binding agreement. However, EU will find it hard to reinvent the wheel and completely change the substance of negotiations. It is up to EU to revisit the Brussels dialogue process and renegotiate agreements that are not implemented from the technical and political dialogue. Unlike the incremental process of normalization that was guiding principle for early stages of the dialogue, a renewed process would have to be based on principles and elements which are clear and measurable, with a defined timetable. If a comprehensive agreement is to be reached, it has to include:

- Resolving the issue of Kosovo membership in international organizations;
- Focus on K-Serb community rights and implementation of pending agreements reached in Brussels, including Community/Association of Serb majority municipalities;
- Provide an incentive for the sides through generous economic development package;
- Focus on the post-agreement democratization of both societies.

EUROPEAN  
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