

BALKANS MONITOR 1/2/2023

07 luty 2023

Przygotował: **Vanessa Tinker**

Does the so-called Franco-German Proposal represent a potential breakthrough or bust to resolve Serbia-Kosovo relations

Things recently heated up in the Serbian Parliament amongst parliamentarians from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, SNS, and opposition. President Aleksandar Vucic initiated a special session following his meeting 20 January 2023 with EU and US representatives concerning the so-called Franco-German proposal to resolve the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. The official purpose for the session was to report on the negotiation process with “the provisional institutions of self-government in Pristina,” the name used by the Serbian government when referring to Kosovo, a country it continues to refuse to recognize.

During the special session, Vucic was accused by the opposition for not having made the proposal public, while others chastised him for attempting to engage in negotiations about Kosovo. Vucic defended himself in both cases, claiming in the first instance that he did not have the right to publish it, and in the second, he had no choice, asserting that the EU threatened to halt Serbia’s integration process as well as have investments blocked if Serbia failed to accept the proposal. The head of the Serbian parliament committee, Milovan Drecun, also sought to back up Vucic, arguing the French-German plan did not represent an ultimatum or final agreement, and rather the proposal should be treated as a platform for further discussions. Both Vucic and Drecun added that one of the ten main discussion points made during the Serb-Kosovo dialogue was the reassurance of the overdue implementation of the so-called Brussels Agreement made in 2013 that envisioned the establishment of the Association/ Community of Serbian Majority Municipalities.

The Agreement has since then continued to serve as one of the primary contentious points of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Although in 2015 Prime Ministers Isa Mustafa of Kosovo and Ivica Dacic of Serbia signed an agreement on establishing the Association, Kosovo’s Constitutional Court ruled the Agreement unconstitutional. The Serbian government since then has accused the Kosovo government of violating the Agreement. Those that have supported the Agreement, view it as a critical tool to integrate Kosovo Serbs into Kosovo jurisdiction and improve normalization of relations between the two countries. Others however have contested the Agreement and in some cases rejected it, arguing that

the Constitution already provides sufficient protections for the Serb community and runs the risk of becoming a Srpska-type situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Kosovo government however has continued to stall the implementation of a plan to establish an association of autonomous majority-Serb municipalities arguing that it refuses to do so until Serbia accepts its territorial integrity and removes all of the parallel institutions it funds around Kosovo.

One of the objectives of the France-German proposal is to revamp dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and promote normalization of relations between the two countries. Although the contents of the proposal has not yet been made public, it was supposedly leaked in Belgrade-, Tirana-, and Brussels-backed media in November 2022, as previously noted in January’s Balkan Monitor. Reportedly the proposal seeks to “develop normal, good neighbourly relations [between the two countries] based on equal rights”; to “reaffirm the inviolability now and in the future of the frontier/boundary existing between them and undertake fully to respect each other’s territorial integrity”; also to exchange “permanent missions” and commit to “mutual respect of each party’s jurisdiction” (BalkanInsight 31 January 2023). The proposal is also allegedly based on the 1972 Basic Treaty whereby the East and West Germany defacto recognized each other without actually including “recognition” in the actual document. The proposal represents part of a larger EU effort to stabilize the region and prevent any spillover effects from Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Although EU and US representatives have expressed that they feel “encouraged” after meeting with both leaders of Serbia and Kosovo in January about the proposal, Daniel Serwer, Professor of the Practice of Conflict Management as well as director of the Conflict Management and American Foreign Policy Programs at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, has not expressed such enthusiasm, arguing that Kosovo and Serbia are far off from reaching any decent agreement. He asserts that it is unlikely the EU and US will persuade President Vucic to accept Prime Minister Kurti’s conditions to normalize relations. To do so would require intense pressure, something the EU and US want to avoid, in fear of pushing Serbia closer towards Russia and China. Other analysts, such as Tene Prelec and Donika Emini in a recent LSE blog, however, suggest that we may be approaching a breakthrough in negotiations over the status of Kosovo, pointing to the recent and subtle changes in Vucic’s statements. Given

that he regards the French–German proposal as the new framework for the dialogue implies that he is taking it more seriously. Alongside of this, Kurti has also acknowledged that he approves the setup and welcomes the shift from Brussels former incremental approach towards something more comprehensive. Whether the French–German proposal represents a breakthrough or a bust, will in large part depend on strategic geopolitical calculations of the EU, US, Kosovo and Serbia in the upcoming months.

Turkey Condemns 9 Western Countries Decision to Close Consulates in Istanbul

For the past few weeks, tensions between Turkey and Western countries have been on the rise. Relations began to sour following Turkey’s retreat from its decision to drop its veto against Sweden and Finnish NATO membership, after alleging that Sweden continues to cooperate with terrorist groups by refusing to extradite dozens of Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK) suspects linked to outlawed Kurdish fighters and the failed coup in 2016. This then triggered Danish, Swedish and Dutch far-right groups to burn copies of the Koran in front of Turkish embassies, sparking outrage, not only in Turkey, but the Muslim world at large, for the governments refusal to step in and stop it. In response, Turkey warned its citizens of other possible Islamophobic, xenophobic, and racist attacks in the US and Europe.

Not long after, the US, along with eight other European countries, including Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, UK, Italy decided to close their consulates, citing possible security concerns, and issuing travel advice with terrorist warnings such as that found on the British Foreign Commonwealth Office, stating for example, “citizens from Western countries may be targets or caught up in attacks” such as in “churches, synagogues, embassies/consulates, and other places frequented by Westerners in Istanbul”. And while the US decided not to close its consulate, it also published travel warnings to its citizens.

In response, Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, along with other Turkish ministers, have harshly criticized Western capitals. Turkish Foreign for failing to share concrete information about the security threats and describing the closures of consulates and/or issuing travel warnings as deliberate with ulterior motives such as tarnishing Turkey’s tourism sector and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan just before the parliamentary and presidential elections likely to be held 14 May 2023. Reportedly Ankara has summoned ambassadors and top representatives from all nine Western countries after deciding to temporarily close their consulates last week and issue travel warnings to rebuke them and give them the ultimatum if they kept it

up. It remains to be seen how and when relations between Turkey and Western capitals will rebound.

Relations Between North Macedonia-Bulgaria Relations Remain Strained

Bilateral relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria have historically been strained due to historical, cultural, and linguistic differences. However, three years ago, these differences came to a head after Bulgaria used its veto power to block accession talks of North Macedonia joining the EU citing slow progress on the implementation of the 2017 Friendship Treaty between the two countries, state-supported or tolerated hate speech and minority claims towards Bulgaria. Then, last year, things appeared to be back on track, after both countries accepted the so-called “French proposal” from the EU’s French presidency under which Bulgaria agreed to remove its EU blockade on condition that North Macedonia change its constitution and list Bulgarians among its constitutive peoples.

Since then however, little progress has been made in making the agreed upon changes, largely in part because North Macedonia has failed to secure a majority in parliament. The opposition maintains that any changes would betray its national interests. Alongside of this, a series of recent incidents and provocations have further caused a set back in bilateral relations. Last month for example, Hristijan Pendikov, a Macedonian man who identifies himself as a Bulgarian minority was attacked and badly beaten at a Bulgarian cultural clubs he works in Ohrid, North Macedonia a place some Macedonians regard as provocative. In response to this incident, the Bulgarian government recalled its ambassador, a move that North Macedonian foreign minister, Bujar Osmani described as “disproportionate” if it was due to the incident. However, as RadioFreeEurope reports, “Bulgarian cultural clubs [have become] a flashpoint for tensions between the countries as their numbers and visibility increased last year.”

Celebrations of historical figures have also caused tension. In the days leading up to the 151 anniversary of the birth of the Ottoman-era revolutionary Gotse Delchev, the Macedonian government reportedly directed the Interior Ministry to take necessary precautions to keep the event safe. Just after, 4 February, North Macedonia’s Interior Ministry announced that three Bulgarians, including former Vazrazhdane deputy Angel Georgiev, were detained at the Deve Bair border crossing with Bulgaria for disturbing public order. Then, 6 February, the Bulgarian Interior Ministry informed that North Macedonian authorities were preventing Bulgarians from entering to come and pay their respects to the memory of Gotse Delchev and proceeded to make accusations that Macedonians have an “unofficial” Bulgarian blacklist. Bulgaria’s interim Minister

of Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev reported, “Many Bulgarian citizens had trouble going through the border with North Macedonia, while the police forces accompanying me were searched by the border controls for over 40 minutes.” The official reasons given for the delays was supposedly due to issues with the electricity supply.

The risk of future incidents remains at an all-time high and suggests that we will likely witness a further deterioration of Bulgaria–North Macedonia relations. In the long run, this could lead to a disruption in efforts to overcome their complex bilateral disputes and lead Bulgaria to reinstate its veto on North Macedonia’s EU accession process.