

# BALKANS MONITOR 1/5/2023

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## **Kosovo-Serbia still far off from Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities Deal**

### **Background**

Little was achieved in the most recent round of high level negotiations in the Pristina–Belgrade dialogue. Held in Brussels, 2 May, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti managed to adopt a Declaration on Missing Persons, but failed to reach an agreement on the establishment of an Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) in Kosovo. The creation of ASM, previously agreed on back in 2013, has yet to be implemented. It represents a major point of contention in the dialogue process, as ASM is non-negotiable for Belgrade and for Pristina, it is only possible if developed according to its vision.

### **Diverging Perspectives**

During the meeting, Kurti refused to accept the EU draft proposal on ASM, arguing that it was incompatible with Kosovo's constitution, as well as antithetical to EU values concerning minority and human rights. Moreover, he insisted it would establish another Republika Srpska-like situation in Kosovo, whereby its leaders continues to undermine the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As an alternative, Kurti presented his own vision for ASM, one that would recognize Kosovo's statehood.

From the perspective of Vucic, Kurti's refusal indicated Pristina's failure to fulfil its commitments made a decade ago. He found Kurti's rejection of the draft proposal unjustified, noting that it did not include a single point that had not been previously discussed and signed back in 2013. Rather, he asserted it demonstrated Pristina's unwillingness to find a solution, and that it signaled a dead end in the furtherance of the dialogue process.

Unlike Vucic's dismal assessment, EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Joseph Borrell viewed the adoption of the Declaration on Missing Persons and the willingness of both leaders to at least discuss the first draft statute of the ASM as "good news". He shared how he viewed the draft statute as a starting point, rather than a final draft, and a positive step forward in the normalization process. Borrell's envoy Miroslav Lajcak, reiterated this positive assessment, stating that Tuesday's meeting was "a crucial step forward", however, emphasizing the im-

portance of avoiding any actions that could deteriorate or further stall the momentum of the talks.

US envoy to the Western Balkans Gabriel Escobar also shared his assessment of the meeting, suggesting that despite the lack of an agreement, the discussion on the issue of ASM had evolved from both sides. He acknowledged that they had not anticipated the leaders would reach an agreement on the draft statute of ASM, but rather were interested in hearing what both sides envisioned, which was achieved. He suggested that the success of the EU-led dialogue process was contingent with the establishment of ASM, viewed as a crucial platform for ethnic Serbs to participate in the civic and democratic life of Kosovo. In the upcoming meeting, scheduled within two weeks, he expressed his hope that both sides would come prepared with refined positions in order to keep the process moving forward.

EU and US optimism, however, may have come too soon, as Kurti ordered the dismissal of the Management Team for ASM the day after the meeting was held. The Management Team had been appointed by the previous government and headed by Danijela Vujicic, an MP from Serbia's ruling party. The EU responded with outrage, as the move represented a clear violation of the dialogue agreement that states the Management Team must be in operation until the ruling of ASM is approved.

### **Implications**

Whether Kurti's most recent move signals a change of heart concerning his commitment to the EU-led dialogue process (if ever there was one), will become more apparent within the next two weeks, when the next high-level meeting is scheduled. From the onset, however, it is important to point out that the level of commitment from either side has remained questionable. Although both sides initially agreed to accept the EU's proposed framework to normalize relations, it came after considerable pressure from both the EU and US. Vucic, for example, shared with reporters that he was told that if he did not accept the proposal, "Serbia would face consequences in its EU accession process and the withdrawal of investment. It will also face damaging global political and economic measures." In a similar manner, Kurti reportedly informed parliament 13 February 2023 that he was told any rejection of the proposal "will [lead to punitive diplomatic countermeasures against] Kosovo and will create a serious weakening of trust

between us and their countries.” While it is true that the EU, perhaps more than ever before, needs to strengthen its ties and cooperation with the Western Balkan countries to offset Russia’s influence in the region, the question is at what cost and for whose benefit? Can such an imposed agreement stick and effectively serve as a means to establish trust and reconciliation between the two sides?

## The UK and EU see a drop in Albanian Asylum Seekers

Albanians represent one of the largest number of asylum seekers in the EU bloc, despite being considered a country of safe origins. In the EU bloc, France and Germany are at the top of the list for Albanian asylum requests – 42% and 23% respectively. The reduction of Albanian asylum seekers is one of the core requirements for Albania’s EU accession.

In 2022, the EU, and to a greater extent the UK, experienced a drastic surge in the number of asylum seekers from Albania, making international headlines and prompting an international response to address the underlying causes – the leading ones reported as poverty, low salaries, increased cost of living, corruption, and a perceived lack of opportunities. In the UK alone, more than 16,000 Albanians (mainly young people) claimed asylum in 2022 – more than triple the number for 2021, causing diplomatic tensions between Tirana and London.

The most recent surge has been blamed by traffickers, who use social media to seduce Albanians to pay them money for a one-way ticket to the EU or UK, often promising them with jobs and accommodations. Although the majority of the asylum requests are found baseless, 4% are reportedly approved on the grounds of domestic violence, fleeing organized crime, human and sex trafficking, and blood feuds. Albania is also recognized as one of the top countries where women and children are trafficked, often exposed to violence, exploitation, slavery, and crime. CRCA/ECPAT, an Albanian child right organization based in Albania recently reported that over 60,000 minors under the age of 18 have claimed asylum during the past 10 years, representing an entire generation of unaccompanied children. Even more worrisome is that many of these children have gone missing. Recently, for example, the UK Home Office came under fire, after admitting in 2023 alone it had lost 39 out of 197 Albanian child asylum seekers from asylum hotels.

In December 2022, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak stepped up measures to offset the surge of illegal migrants arriving in the UK by initiating an agreement with Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania to address security issues and home affairs – namely organized crime and illegal immigration. The relationship between the two countries however has remained strained, as Sunak and his Conservative par-

ty have been criticized for singling out Albania and using harsh rhetoric against Albanians using such references as “invaders” and “dangerous criminals”. Prime Minister Edi Rama has criticized the UK government, calling their rhetoric xenophobic and stating it was the UK, and not Albania to blame for its faltering migration policies.

In the first quarter of 2023, the UK and the EU have observed a rapid drop in the number of Albanian asylum seekers. Sunak and his supporters credit their policies and tougher stance on illegal migration, having returned, for example, 500 illegal migrants to Albania within the first three months of 2023. Others attribute harsher weather conditions and a reduction of trafficking activity by organized criminal gangs who may fear being caught after the increased social media attention. It remains uncertain as to whether this trend is temporary or will hold. Tackling illegal migration will remain one of the core issues Albania must address to continue its accession into the EU.

## Massive Protests “Serbia Against Violence” Held in Belgrade

Following two mass shootings last week in Serbia – 3rd and 5th of May, over 50,000 people took part in a peaceful and silent protest “Serbia Against Violence” organized by the opposition that assembled in front of the Serbian Parliament in Belgrade 8 May. The organizers included the Democratic Party, the People’s Party, the Green Left Front – Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own, the Together party, Party of Freedom and Justice Party, the Movement of Free Citizens, United Unions Sloga and Movement for Reversal. The opposition however emphasized ahead of the protests that it was not partisan and that no party symbols or speeches would take place.

Protestors have made several demands that can broadly be summarized as the following: the closure of all TV stations and tabloids promoting violence and vulgar content, the dismissal of key authorities that they feel should be held responsible including the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) Council members, Education Minister Branko Ruzic (who already resigned this past Sunday), Internal Affairs Minister Bratislav Gasic, and Security Information Agency (BIA) director Aleksandar Vulin, the Serbian state TV (RTS) management, and the resignation of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, and an emergency parliamentary session to discuss the security situation in the country and to establish long-term solutions to ensure such events never happen again. Protestors have given the government till 12 May to meet all of their demands, otherwise they have threatened to hold another protest.

Ignoring protestors demands to resign, President Aleksandar Vucic has meanwhile responded to the mass

shootings by promising stricter gun laws, more severe fines for illegal arms and a stronger police presence in schools. He has also called for the wider “disarmament” of Serbia, stressing that the current number of licenses for arms needs to be cut by 90 per cent. Additionally, the government has announced a gun amnesty program whereby anyone with illegal arms can report them to the police without incurring any penalties over the next 30 days. Already police reported that 1,400 weapons, 45,000 pieces of ammunition, and 100 mine-explosive devices had been handed over. Serbia is ranked third globally with the highest number of small arms with 39.1 firearms per 100 people, and more than 78,000 people with hunting licenses. Many of these weapons are held illegally, obtained during the wars in the 1990s. Authorities have since then issued several amnesties for owners to hand in or register illicit guns, yet many still remain unaccounted for.

## **New Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Sworn In**

Despite many delays and setback, and more importantly the intervention of High Representative Christian Schmidt (for the second time in just a few months), the new government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), headed by Prime Minister Nermin Nikšić (SDP), was finally sworn in. The appointment of the new government was confirmed by the House of Representatives of the Federal Parliament at an extraordinary session on April 28 in Sarajevo. The new government is made up of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian Democratic Union of 1990 and the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina, People and Justice and Our Party. For the next four years, the competencies of individual ministers will be put to the test. Citizens expectations of the new government’s performance range from little/or nothing will change to a more optimistic outlook.