

The border demarcation agreement between Kosovo and Montenegro was concluded amidst a situation of high public and political tension, which ultimately led to early elections. The keyword back then was “visa liberalization”, in the sense that Kosovo ought to give up some hectares of its territory to get visa liberalization in return. President Thaci went at great lengths to secure an agreement, using the full range of his presidential powers and political prowess to send the agreement to the Parliament. The debate about the demarcation with Montenegro consumed time and energy, and risked to throw the country in the maelstrom of extraordinary elections.

At any rate, hefty as it was, the Kosovo-Montenegrin border crisis might end up seeming a mere summer rain in comparison to the thunderstorm of the recent Kosovo-Serbia negotiations, scheduled to start on 7 September in Brussels. From their media appearances Thaci and Vucic seem to have hammered out an agreement already; yet the whole point is how to sell it to their respective audiences.

The first public mentioning by President Thaci of “correcting the borders between Kosovo and Serbia” caught everyone by surprise. Thaci made a direct appeal to the aspirations of the Albanians in Presevo valley to join Kosovo, in an attempt to cover up the backside of a possible deal to transfer Northern Kosovo under Serbia’s control.

In a lengthy communication with the media on 3 August 2018, President Thaci warned of the impracticability of exchanging the Presevo valley for Northern Kosovo, yet the debate on this topic served as a natural passage towards what was aptly termed as the correction of Kosovo’s northern boundaries. “I don’t want to sound too pessimistic, yet I have to stress it in front of the public, that should I fail in this historical endeavor (to unify the Presevo Valley with Kosovo), I will not feel ashamed for at least trying to correct this historical injustice”, he said.

I would personally not exclude the existence of a strategy conceived, and maybe still upheld by Thaci, aimed at including the issue of the Presevo valley in the negotiations between Kosovo and Belgrade, as a mechanism to provide for additional protection and guarantees, and to add to his own leverage on Serbia, in relation to Serbia’s claims on Northern Kosovo, and on its conditions to recognize Kosovo’s independence.

On the other hand, Mr. Ali Ahmeti (chairman of BDI party in Macedonia) clearly and simply stated: “Thaci has no strategy on Presevo’s Albanians”.

The President of Kosovo is right now inside the maelstrom of the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations, and he is going headlong further on, in what seems a free fall, covered by secrets known only to him and covered by external uncertainties. On the internal front, it seems all actors, including the Parliament of Kosovo are solidly positioned against him. On the external front, many countries seem to be aligned with Germany and Great Britain, who made it clear that they stand against a partition of Kosovo. Facing these formidable challenges, during his stay in Alpbach, Austria, President Thaci sought to dispel some of the fog from the details of the agreement under negotiation. In one occasion he noted: “The countries in the region, the EU member states and other countries of the world should not be against or be afraid of a potential peaceful

agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, regardless whether such agreement would entail a correction of the borders.”

At any rate, the chaos ensued from the myriad of debates on the unforeseen reopening of the discussion of the Kosovo-Serbia border issue helped President Thaci press further with the presentation of the details of the proposed agreement, which might turn out to be just a “cosmetic” transfer of Northern Kosovo against the recognition of Kosovo’s independence by Serbia, rather than a classical exchange of territories between the two countries. It remains to be seen in the months to come to what lengths “the cosmetic dimension” of this intervention will go. Yet, ultimately, “cosmetics” seems to be closely linked with the price Kosovo ought to pay to its northern neighbor, in exchange for a seat in the United Nations. At this point this seems to be the kernel of the discussions envisaged to be held by the Thaci-Vucic duo, with some sort of “understanding” from foreign policy officials from Brussels and from the region.

The supporters of the thesis of “correction of borders / exchange of territories” have gone at great lengths in their endeavors to describe it as “a creative solution”. In fact, this thesis was discussed and then laid aside before under the former Serbian Prime Minister, the late Zoran Đinđić. It seems that President Vucic has taken it back on board, and repackaged it for the national and international public opinion as a novelty conceived by Nenad Vasic of the Institute of International Economic Policy (IIEP), a pro-government Serbian think-tank, working in conjunction with the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), another Serbian think-tank, advancing Euro-Atlantic policies as a way of countering Russian influence in the country.

These think-tanks presented two reports, the first one in March 2018 and the other one in mid-July 2018. These reports promoted “creative” ideas to help find a way out of the internal Serbian impasse regarding the dialogue with Pristina. Further to the publication of these reports, President Vucic asked from the Serbian people to prepare for a “painful compromise” in relation to the final phase of dialogue with Kosovo, implying most certainly the recognition of Kosovo’s independence. In his appeal, Vucic invited the Serbians to accept a reality that is in existence since 1999, and which was officially recognized in 2010 by the International Court at The Hague, which ruled in favor of Kosovo’s independence. Nonetheless, “in order to save Mr. Vucic’s face” (in the words of the CEAS report), who is bound to accept *de jure* Kosovo’s independence, he needs to receive Northern Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Leposavic in exchange.

Presidents Thaci and Vucic were vocal in asking for external pressures in relation to these “creative proposals” to be withheld, by maintaining that Serbia and Kosovo are capable of solving their problems on their own, by aiming at a historical reconciliation.

There is of course no doubt on the fact that Serbia possesses superior capabilities that put it in a position to dominate negotiations with Kosovo. It is difficult to maintain that Kosovo can field anything similar or comparable with what Serbia has. Regardless of the soundness of its arguments, Serbia has clearly shown its superiority vis-à-vis Kosovo in three main directions: first of all, in building up internal cohesion in relation to the negotiations with Kosovo, secondly, in leading the debate in relation to the Kosovo issue

by providing ideas, openings and solutions pointing at a possible final compromise; and thirdly, Serbia has significantly improved its relations with Washington, by thus putting Kosovo between a rock and a hard place, as Kosovo still struggles to find points of contact with the new Trump administration. Maybe this is the reason behind President Thaci's somewhat panic-stricken approach, driving his demand to urgently get Kosovo's recognition by Serbia, regardless of the possible added costs this might bring on Kosovo's territorial integrity.

The projection of Kosovo's endgame has been traditionally a domain of Western democracies, engaged to project their geopolitical solution on a country they recognized as independent upon their own concerted military liberation campaign. None of these countries, including the United States of America, has set any conditions on Kosovo so as to force it to change the existing course of negotiations with Serbia. Under the framework applicable so far, Kosovo has gone a long way under the protection and friendly support of Western democracies. Therefore it would be a rather absurd proposition to ask them to leave, because the victim has surprisingly decided to have a tête-à-tête negotiations with its aggressor!

The unexpected announcement of an actual platform of negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade by President Thaci enabled the public opinion in Pristina to understand that neither its sovereignty nor its territorial integrity is to be taken for granted. On the contrary, its territories are now being discussed as being subject of negotiations, corrections, and of "creative" solutions, which might set a precedent for other creative border corrections – by posing a serious challenge to the stability of the region. From this viewpoint, a more careful approach ought to be adopted by Kosovo, as it is hard to believe that presidents Thaci and Vucic will sit alone in the negotiation table.

Regardless of the internal and international challenges of the Trump Presidency, the USA are under no pressure that would cause them to let go of regions such as the Western Balkans, where adventures involving changing borders and exchange of territories and populations can be hardly presented as models of peace and stability (!). An eventual precedent set by the correction of borders between Serbia and Kosovo would become a trump card in Serbia's, but also in Russia's hands to "cosmetically" correct borders, that in real world terms would translate in the invasion of other territories similar to Crimea. All the cases mentioned by President Thaci were related to agreements between sovereign states. Nonetheless, President Thaci seems ready and willing to sit on the same table with a country who openly does not accept Kosovo as its equal, but only as its former autonomous province.

Belgrade ought to recognize Kosovo's independence first. Any negotiation of demarcation of borders ought to build on this precondition. We should recall that back in 2009, Macedonia and Kosovo had a hard time to find a solution for the demarcation in one area in the vicinity of Kumanovo, as the border happened to pass inside the private properties of some Albanians. There exists no warranty that Kosovo's independence would be recognized by Serbia at the end of a process that would take decades to complete. Therefore, Kosovo's recognition by Serbia should be a non-

negotiable precondition, leading the way to a dialogue among equals. That would make for a serious beginning for all parties.

Kosovo does not consider its recognition by Serbia as a top priority; therefore, in view of the present circumstances, it should try to buy time and avoid any rushed decision. Kosovo should try to do what Serbia has already done: try to win back the attention of the U.S, and consolidate its current credentials, with the available international support.

Until now, the President and the Prime Minister of Kosovo have held diverging positions in relation to the correction of the borders with Serbia (they also differed in relation to the demarcation of borders with Montenegro). It's high time for them to come together with the political and parliamentary parties so as to enhance their negotiation capabilities vis-à-vis Belgrade. They should avoid using the current discord to foment further division hoping to increase their political capital.

The President of Kosovo, in view of his declarations, ought to be more concrete, more straightforward and more open towards his citizens. He needs to provide for full disclosure on the steps leading to a Pristina-Belgrade agreement before inviting his citizens to participate in a referendum in this regard.

The Ahtisaari plan, which set the framework for Kosovo's constitutionality and independence, came as a result of tough negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, held with the support of the international community, and with the consensual presence of all of Kosovo's representatives. That plan was not a free lunch for Kosovo, yet it paved the way for future progress, also thanks to the unity of the Kosovo political class. Kosovo's political elite has the capacities to reach a consensus, which ought to be more comprehensive than only a simple decision on the leader of its delegation. Kosovo ought to reach a consensus of the priorities to be negotiated. In the present case, what is being discussed is whether a compromise ought to be reached on ceding a piece of the country's territory against the formal recognition of the country by its neighbor.

Kosovo's internal unity is a matter of national priority and one of the pillars that will sustain its achievements to date. The President and the Prime Minister of Kosovo ought to invite all stakeholders in a roundtable so as to inform the needed consensus on the next steps to take. Should they fail to do so, then the dialogue with Belgrade will stumble upon Kosovo's internal crisis.

At the international level, Kosovo ought to have welcomed the declaration of Chancellor Merkel and the stance of Great Britain against the partition of Kosovo. Also, the Pristina and Tirana diplomats ought to find channels of communications with the new Trump administration, not only for the sake of Kosovo, but also to the benefit of regional stability.

The United States, Germany, Great Britain and NATO cannot pose an obstacle to the partition of Kosovo if Kosovo and its institutions are not in a position to make their case heard. They should rise up to this challenge, by countering the endeavors of each and

every factor aiming at damaging the sovereignty, integrity and constitutionality of Kosovo.

*Opinion : Ambassador Arben Çejku*

