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**MOVING BORDERS BETWEEN KOSOVO  
AND SERVIA:  
OPENING UP THE BALKANS PANDORA'S BOX?**

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**Abstract:** The article analyses the possibility of Pristina and Belgrade accepting to change Kosovo's borders and its likely consequences for peace in the Balkans. It argues that such a possibility raises worries of further instability – including war – returning to the region as other minorities feel discriminated against and the will for independence or integration in a neighbouring country grows and turns into a chain reaction. The logic of exchanging some of North Kosovo municipalities with a Serb majority for some eastern Serbian ones of Albanian majority is one of separation of ethnic groups. This goes against the prevailing consensus although the opinion of part of the international community seems to be shifting. However, Kosovo is not just a territory of Albanian majority where many Serbs live. It is also the melting pot where the Serbian orthodoxy and culture come together with its churches and monasteries dating back to the Middle Ages. The reality is that since the end of the war nearly twenty years ago and several attempts to pacify Kosovo the region remains very unstable. The UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and the Ahtsaari plan in 2007 for a multi-ethnic and democratic Kosovo were insufficient to generate a mutually accepted solution although it conceded several rights to the Serb minority and protection of their religious monasteries under international supervision. Furthermore, most of the negotiations that occurred since the 2011 clashes led to agreements hardly ever implemented and part of the region, notably North Kosovo, still remains very unstable.

**Keywords:** Kosovo; Serbia; Changing Borders; Independence; War.

## Introduction

On August 10, 2018, Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian President announced that he was willing to accept a partition of Kosovo to put an end to the long-standing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. A few days later, the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi stated that he would oppose a partition of the territory but that he would agree to a border correction as a way to solve disputes.<sup>1</sup> On October 25,

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Santora, 'Talk of Ethnic Partition of Kosovo Revives Old Balkan Ghosts', *New York Times*, September 19, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/world/europe/kosovo-partition-aleksandar->

during the New Perspectives on EU<sup>2</sup> Enlargement Plenary Session at the European Forum Alpbach both presidents reiterated their agreement to an exchange of territories.<sup>3</sup>

The timing of the declarations clearly seems to indicate that there is some complicity with regards to the general idea of some kind of territorial partition. Presently, following some general local opposition the Serbian President seems more cautious about the idea, but the President of Kosovo maintains his initial position. Be that as it may, the above-mentioned declarations concerning a partition of Kosovo have spurred fears related to the 1990's war in the Balkans and of ethnic cleansing.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, it raises a major concern, which is that this may lead to a resurgence of violence within that area or that populations in other regions within the Balkans will also want the frontiers of the territories where they live to be revisited.

The article is organized as follows: Following the introduction, I present a brief overview of the situation in Kosovo in terms of the main efforts that have been undertaken since the 1990s in order to solve the conflict and of some of the main difficulties in achieving peace and stability. Then, I discuss what exactly is at stake and how this potential solution of territorial partition is perceived in terms of what has been considered by the Contact Group.<sup>5</sup> Next, I address the debate related to partition and how different parties perceive it in terms of the risks involved or as a possible solution. Following that, I discuss what may well be the only alternative solution to partition in order to achieve peace and stability. The article ends with a brief conclusion that summarizes the main issues including a possible way forward towards a peaceful solution.

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[yucic.html](#); Group of authors, 'Scenario: Partition as a solution for Serbia-Kosovo normalization', *European Western Balkans*, April 24, 2019. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/04/24/scenario-partition-solution-serbia-kosovo-normalization/>.

<sup>2</sup> European Union.

<sup>3</sup> European Forum Alpbach 2018, 'Diversity and Resilience', [https://issuu.com/forumalpbach/docs/european\\_forum\\_alpbach\\_2018/10](https://issuu.com/forumalpbach/docs/european_forum_alpbach_2018/10); <https://www.alpbach.org/en/forum/forum2018/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly – NATO's War to Save Kosovo*, (Washington DC.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); Florian Bieber and Zidas Daskalovski (Eds.), *Understanding the War in Kosovo*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The Contact Group is the name for an informal grouping of countries that have a significant interest in policy developments in the Balkans in the attempt to promote the future stability of the region and the implementation of a multi-ethnic Kosovo. It is composed of the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy. It was first created in response to the war and the crisis in Bosnia in the early 1990s.

## A solution hard to attain

Although attached as part of Serbia since 1945 by Tito Kosovo had been an autonomous province until his death in 1980 and until war broke in the early 1990s. Presently, it has about 1.740.000 inhabitants – mostly Albanians – and 120.000 Serbs who live mainly in the north where they account for about 90% of the population. In the 1990's, Milosovic suppressed Kosovo's autonomy and this led to an internal opposition, initially a peaceful one but later violent. The latter was led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

Subsequent events are well documented until the occurrence of the NATO bombardments in March 1999 following the failure of the Rambouillet Agreement.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations SCR 1244 of June 10 of 1999 attempted to settle the situation, including a number of negotiations, one of them led by Martti Ahtisaari, which came to be known as the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (CSO). This was an attempt to obtain a status settlement proposal covering a wide range of issues related to Kosovo. Most unfortunately, these negotiations proved to be insufficient to generate an acceptable solution to both parties involved in the conflict.

Nevertheless, much seems to have been achieved since then in terms of softening and improving of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, many divergences still persist and the resentments of nationalists on both sides against much of the progress that has been achieved cannot be underestimated in terms of disturbances and opposition to a final and enduring settlement. Many of the attempts for a settlement have relied on the prospect for EU accession but timing is also a crucial variable regarding that process as changes in leadership on both sides of the negotiation can alter the situation significantly, as was the case in Serbia in 2012.<sup>8</sup>

The Ahtisaari Plan attempted to offer to the Serb minority in Kosovo several rights and protection to their religious sites and monasteries under an internationally supervised independence of Kosovo. Kosovo accepted the proposal but not Serbia. This is an important issue given that it does reveal the importance of Kosovo for Serbs, to whom Kosovo is significantly more than just a territory where many of them live. It is the crucible of the Serbian orthodoxy and culture

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Bacevich and Eliot Cohen (Eds.), *War over Kosovo*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev, 'Kosovo and Serbia Make a Deal: Debalkanizing the Balkans', *Foreign Affairs*, April 24, 2013. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/kosovo/2013-04-24/kosovo-and-serbia-make-deal>.

<sup>8</sup> In mid-2012, the Prime Minister of Serbia at the time, Mirko Cvetkovic, lost to Ivica Dacic, who was a more nationalist figure. That created some difficulties in the negotiations between the EU and Serbia.

where many religious sites and monasteries are located.<sup>9</sup> To Kosovars is represents essentially a land of long-lasting Serbian domination.

Despite all that, the Ahtisaari Plan was put in place after Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 – one that was essentially supported by the West. It also followed the International Court of Justice ruling that the declaration of independence was not contrary to international law and the EU suggesting acting as mediator between the two conflicting parties. Importantly, in order to ease acceptance of the EU initiative there was also the prospect of EU accession.

The EU has played a significant role in Kosovo, in addition to the United States, even if five of its members do not recognize Kosovo's independence.<sup>10</sup> Additional efforts undertaken in 2011, in terms of dialogue and cooperation by the EU or at least with its support, generated some formal agreements but most of them have not been respected and taken seriously by both Serbia and Kosovo. Police and justice institutions have been established in the north of Kosovo but the territory remains very much one that is controlled by mafia groups.<sup>11</sup> Noteworthy, neither China nor Russia recognize Kosovo's independence, which means that Kosovo may be, *de facto*, independent, but not *de jure*, for the overall international community.

### Breaking the frontier taboo

There is an historical mismatch between the different ethnic populations and the region's border, which is particularly significant with the Serbs and the Albanians. This is, in fact, one of the major causes of the war that occurred in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> It is in light of the above situation that the two Presidents of Serbia and Kosovo both made declarations noting their acceptance of the idea of exchanging territories. More specifically, they would be willing to exchange four municipalities in the north of Kosovo, Leposavic, Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Zvecan against three municipalities of Albanian majority in the Presevo Valley in Serbia, that is, Bujanovac, Medveda and Presevo. Noteworthy, these last ones had already shown willingness to be part of Kosovo in an illegal referendum that took place in 1992.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Some consider it the Jerusalem of Belgrade.

<sup>10</sup> Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

<sup>11</sup> A good example of this is the assassination of the Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic. Ivanovic served as the State Secretary of the Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija from 2008 to 2012 and who was also a member of the Coordination Center for Kosovo and Metohija from 2001 to 2008. He was assassinated by unknown perpetrators on 16 January 2018 in North Mitrovic.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, 'How to Fix the Western Balkans: European Integration Is Still the Best Path Toward Reform', *Foreign Affairs*, July 7, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2017-07-07/how-fix-western-balkans>.

<sup>13</sup> Blerta Begisholli, 'Kosovo MPs Debate Thaci's Presevo Unification Resolution', *BalkanInsight*,

However, the above-mentioned declarations would seem to break an important taboo that had been set by the Contact Group.<sup>14</sup> The Contact Group favoured overall negotiations involving the international community according to principles accepted by all parties. Among these principles, that were also ratified by the United Nations Security Council on November 10, 2005, were that any final solution should be compatible with international law; that Kosovo should be multicultural and multi-ethnic; that it would include guaranties for the protection of cultural identities and religious heritage; and that it should ensure territorial integrity plus the internal stability of the countries in the region. Nevertheless, although Ahtisaari was somewhat sidelined in 2007<sup>15</sup> these are, in fact, the principles under which the Ahtisaari Plan was established, which also help explain why every time the idea of a territorial partition was mentioned when trying to settle the dispute it would be firmly rejected.

### The risks brought about by tensions and resentments

The risks involved with territory partition are significant and cannot be underestimated. The Balkans are a mosaic of minorities. For instance, Serbia, even excluding Kosovo, has more than 20% of non-Serbs with a significant part being the Albanians living in the Presevo Valley. Macedonia has about 25% of Albanians and Montenegro also has an Albanian minority. Undoubtedly, the most complicated situation lies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is a decentralized country comprising two autonomous entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Republika Srpska, following the 1995 Dayton Accords. The former consists of ten autonomous cantons with their respective governments and is populated essentially by Catholics and by Muslim Bosnians in cities where tensions between the two communities are common, whereas the latter is almost exclusively populated by Orthodox Serbians.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the centre of all the tensions and resentments related to the war in the Balkans with its deaths of over 120.000 people, about a million of refugees and the well-know and infamous massacre at Srebrenica. Unfortunately, the Dayton Accords put an end to the war but by no means

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July 2, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/02/kosovo-mps-fail-to-pass-thacis-presevo-unification-resolution/>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Statement on Kosovo by Contact Group Ministers', *Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs*, September 27, 2007. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/93059.htm>.  
<https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/62459.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> BIRN, 'Contact Group to Take over Kosovo Status from UN', *BalkanInsight*, July 17, 2007. <https://balkaninsight.com/2007/07/17/contact-group-to-take-over-kosovo-status-from-un/>.



created the necessary conditions for people to live in peace and security. Significantly, Milorad Dodik, the former President of Republika Srpska between 2010 and 2018 and currently the Serb member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina even refuses the idea that there was a genocide at Srebrenica. Further, he often makes declarations threatening with secession and he has close ties with Moscow. Bakir Izetbegovic, a former Bosniak member of the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2010 to 2018, welcomed President Erdogan in Sarajevo as part of the existing close ties with Ankara.<sup>16</sup> On a different note, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina that was created after the signing of the Dayton Accords did not always prove to be an efficient institution. It was the object of some criticism and ended up being closed in February 2008. To a large extent, it is this risky and uncertain environment with multiple interests, distinct cultures and conflicting political ideas that has frequently prevented talks concerning the idea of territorial partition or of moving borders.

### Opposing views on the risks of partition

There seems to be a majority view that there are considerable risks associated with territorial partition in the Balkans. In effect, more than thirty NGOs concerned with the Balkan region consider that a division of territory of Kosovo would very likely lead to widespread violence across the region. In other words, not only it would generate conflict in Kosovo, but it would in all probability spread to other neighboring areas in the Balkan region and fuel ideas of additional territorial partitions. This position was clearly stated in an open letter sent by about thirty five NGOs to Federica Mogherini, who has been serving as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.<sup>17</sup> This was followed by over fifty signatories that are considered Balkan experts.<sup>18</sup> Carl Bildt, Paddy Ashdown and Christian Schwarz-Schilling, three former High Representatives for Bosnia and Herzegovina also made very similar claims in an open letter

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<sup>16</sup> Agata Palickova, 'Erdogan visits Bosnia as part of bigger game', *Euractiv Network*, July 10, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/erdogan-visits-bosnia-as-part-of-bigger-game/>; Hamdi Firat Buyuk, 'Erdogan's Sarajevo Visit May Affect Bosniak Leadership Race', *BalkanInsight*, July 8, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/08/erdogans-sarajevo-visit-may-effect-bosniak-leadership-race/>.

<sup>17</sup> BIRN, 'EU Urged to Speak Up Against Kosovo Partition', *BalkanInsight*, Aug 7, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/07/eu-urged-to-speak-up-against-kosovo-partition-08-07-2018/>.

<sup>18</sup> Filip Rudic, 'Open Letter 'Implores' EU, US, to Reject Partition', *BalkanInsight*, Aug 31, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/31/experts-and-organisations-pen-letter-against-serbia-kosovo-partition-08-31-2018/>.

to Mogherini.<sup>19</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel has also often expressed her firm opposition to any idea of a territorial partition of Kosovo.<sup>20</sup>

However, this view is not unanimous. A number of other voices, namely former National Security Adviser John Bolton, expressed the view that the U.S. would not oppose a partition of territory if the two sides were to agree to it.<sup>21</sup> That should not be considered surprising given that both President Trump and President Putin had agreed to that solution about a month earlier.<sup>22</sup> More surprising are the comments made by Neighbourhood Commissioner Johannes Hahn at a press conference in Austria with both Presidents of Kosovo and Serbia, Hashim Thaçi and Aleksandar Vučić, respectively, in support of a border correction to solve the dispute if agreed by both parties.<sup>23</sup>

This is not a simple issue. Indeed, there may be an argument to be made for a partition based on the experience of the last twenty years, which is the fact that these populations do not seem to be able to live together in a peaceful manner. Following that argument, there does not seem to be a reason to force populations that do not get along and are unable to live peacefully to share the same territory. This line of thought was put forward by Bernard Kouchner. Back in 2007 he made comments that did not rule out the possibility of partition<sup>24</sup> and later, on September 2008, he declared that partition was a “good solution” if both Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaçi agreed to it. In that case and according to Kouchner, it made no sense whatsoever for others to oppose that solution.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately,

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Rettman, ‘Sweden urges EU to take control of north Kosovo problem’, *EU Observer*, Nov. 28, 2011. <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/114422>. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/29/former-high-representatives-call-eu-to-abandon-plans-on-swapping-territory-08-29-2018/>.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Gray, ‘Angela Merkel: No Balkan border changes’, *Politico*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>.

<sup>21</sup> Filip Rudic, ‘US Won’t Oppose Serbia-Kosovo Border Changes – Bolton’, *BalkanInsight*, Aug 24, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/24/us-will-not-weigh-in-on-serbia-kosovo-partition-08-24-2018/>.

<sup>22</sup> Report, ‘Trump, Putin agree on Kosovo partition during summit, report says’, *Daily Sabah*, July 26, 2018. <https://www.dailysabah.com/balkans/2018/07/26/trump-putin-agree-on-kosovo-partition-during-summit-report-says>.

<sup>23</sup> Georgi Gotev, ‘EU Commission encourages border ‘corrections’ to settle Kosovo-Serbia relations’, *Euractiv Network*, Aug. 27, 2018. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/commission-encourages-border-corrections-to-settle-kosovo-serbia-relations/>.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Hamilton, ‘Major powers nudge Serbs, Kosovo towards partition’, *Relief Web*, July 12, 2007. <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/major-powers-nudge-serbs-kosovo-towards-partition>.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Baptiste Chastand et Marc Semo, ‘Balkans : Bernard Kouchner d’accord pour « bouger les frontières »: L’ex-ministre français des affaires étrangères est favorable à un échange de territoires entre Serbie et Kosovo’, *Le Monde*, September 8, 2018. <https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/09/06/balkans-bernard-kouchner-d-accord-pour-bouger-les->

the territorial partition may be seen just as a simple border correction based on the majorities living in each territory.

Despite all the arguments for and against territorial partition, this is a contested issue and one that has been a central concern for the people of Kosovo. In clear contrast with President Thaçi the government of Kosovo has refused to accept any partition, or land swap, of the territory.<sup>26</sup> Kosovo's former Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj, declared not so long ago that any territorial swap "would mean war" for the region and that it would destabilize the Balkans.<sup>27</sup> He resigned last July after being summoned by a war crimes court in The Hague allegedly committed when he was a KLA commander and as a result, he will not be able to put forward his position on this matter in a formal way.<sup>28</sup> However, it may well represent a view that needs to be accounted for. The Serbian Church in Kosovo also appears to oppose any partition or swapping of territory.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly, Father Abbot Janjic, a prominent Serbian priest at the Serbian Orthodox monastery of Visoki Dečani in Kosovo has made strong comments against any partition or territorial exchange suggesting that it would lead to war again like it occurred in the 1990s.<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that with the possible exception of Serbs in the north the remaining in Kosovo would probably lose out as the religious sites and monasteries have benefited from the EU and KFOR<sup>31</sup> protection under the Ahtisaari Plan. However, there are no guarantees that this would be the case following a negotiation for territorial exchange and where the Serbian population in the three southern municipalities would be a minority in a more homogeneous Kosovo. But there are other risks. One of them could be the possibility of some raising the prospects for a Greater Albania. This could also

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[frontieres.5351100.3214.html](https://frontieres.5351100.3214.html).

<sup>26</sup> BIRN, 'Kosovo FM: Partition would "Open Gates of Hell"', *BalkanInsight*, July 1, 2011. <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/07/01/serbian-ideas-for-kosovo-partition-could-have-domino-effect-kosovo-foreign-minister/>.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel McLaughlin, 'Kosovo Premier warns border change with Serbia "would mean war": Ramush Haradinaj says land swap would help Russia destabilise the Balkans', *The Irish Times*, Aug. 29, 2018. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/kosovo-premier-warns-border-change-with-serbia-would-mean-war-1.3611717>.

<sup>28</sup> 'Kosovo PM Haradinaj resigns over war crimes summons', BBC News, July 19, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49047355>.

<sup>29</sup> Maja Zivanovic, 'Kosovo Likely to Overshadow Serbian Church Synod', *BalkanInsight*, Aug. 24, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/08/24/kosovo-can-t-be-avoid-for-serbian-orthodox-church-08-23-2018/>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew MacDowall, 'Could land swap between Serbia and Kosovo lead to conflict?', *The Guardian*, Aug. 22, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/22/serbia-kosovo-could-land-swap-between-lead-conflict>

<sup>31</sup> NATO-led Kosovo Force.

spark again, and in turn, the idea of a Greater Serbia which would raise the possibility of further conflicts.

### Where to go from here?

Beyond all the above, it remains to be seen if what the majority of Serbs and Albanians aim for is to live in a national and ethnically homogeneous state taking into consideration the high rate of migration in the region into multicultural states.<sup>32</sup> The nature of this high rate of migration would seem to suggest that issues like employment and economic welfare would be considered more important than cultural and ethnic matters. In that sense, partition would not seem as inevitable as some may consider. Nevertheless, it is difficult to have an improvement in economic conditions without political stability and presently Kosovo does not even have a stable government following the resignation of Haradinaj and the decision to dissolve parliament.<sup>33</sup>

The recent Parliamentary elections that took place on October 6 may well result in significant changes although there is still much uncertainty. The final election results confirmed Albin Kurti of the Vetevendosje party as the victor.<sup>34</sup> Kurti has pledged economic reforms and improving the law and order situation in the nascent Western Balkans democracy, with a particular focus on fighting corruption. Significantly, his party continues to call for unification with Albania. Following the result of the election he also declared that he was not eager to resume talks with Serbia.<sup>35</sup> Presently, he is trying to form a government with the conservative LDK

<sup>32</sup> Eric Gordy, 'Why Borders Are Not the Problem – or the Solution – for Serbia and Kosovo: In the Balkans, Redrawing Maps Serves Politicians, Not Citizens', *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 10, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/kosovo/2018-10-10/why-borders-are-not-problem-or-solution-serbia-and-kosovo>.

<sup>33</sup> News Wires, 'Kosovo lawmakers vote to dissolve parliament, triggering new elections', *France 24*, Aug. 22, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190822-kosovo-parliament-vote-snap-elections-serbia-Ramush-Haradinaj>; 'Crisis-hit Kosovo disbands parliament', *Aljazeera News*, Aug. 22, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/crisis-hit-kosovo-disbands-parliament-190821154536251.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Eraldin Fazliu, 'New chapter': What a left-wing victory means for Kosovo: *Self Determination Movement won snap polls against backdrop of Kosovo's sour relations with Serbia and corruption*, *Aljazeera News*, Oct. 8, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/chapter-left-wing-victory-means-kosovo-191007084722337.html>.

<sup>35</sup> 'Kosovo Election Winner Not in Hurry to Renew Serbia Talks', *RadioFree Europe Radio Liberty*, Oct. 8, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-election-winner-not-in-hurry-to-renew-serbia-talks/30206865.html>.

party in order to push the ruling PDK into opposition.<sup>36</sup> What this all means is that relations between Kosovo and Serbia in the coming future may well not be easy.

Arguably, a territorial partition of Kosovo would reveal many of the weaknesses of the EU with regards to this process. There is an argument to be made that the EU acted in an excessively confident mode as facilitator between Serbia and Kosovo in the sense of considering that the prospects of EU accession would be sufficient to solve matters and avoid ideas of territorial partition. To a large extent, this belief would be premised on the idea that prospects of EU accession and the ability of current leaders to retain power would outpace the necessary implementation of policies to promote reforms and reconciliation, thereby also putting an end to corruption and economic stagnation. That being the case, for the prospects of EU accession to suffice it would require local leaders to privilege and embrace longer term benefits of EU membership to short term gains that are often influenced by recent history and present existing tensions and wounds. In addition, the EU *modus operandi* was probably not sufficiently targeted towards achieving the goals with a more clearly defined roadmap and with a more thorough follow up of the entire process. If that had been the case, it would likely have helped local leaders to better perceive the benefits of EU membership and therefore focus on the necessary reforms for EU accession while mobilizing their respective societies.

Notwithstanding, much of what is likely to happen will be conditional on the view taken by the great powers, particularly the U.S. and Russia, but also China. The American stand seems open to the idea of partition under certain conditions but that could well mean the acceptance of the notion that has been promoted by Steve Bannon<sup>37</sup>, of ethnically pure nations militating against diversity and multiculturalism, the kind of ideas that also seems to be shared by President Trump. On their part, both Russia and China have consistently opposed Kosovo's independence.<sup>38</sup> Plus, both China and Russia have economic and geostrategic interests in the region.<sup>39</sup> For that reason as well, Russia has no interest in seeing any strengthening occurring on the part of the EU, particularly with the EU membership of Serbia, not to mention the possibility of joining NATO at a later stage. Be that as it may, both the American and the Russian perspectives somewhat reinforce each other and could well even lead

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<sup>36</sup> Jack Robinson, 'Deadline set on formation of the next government', *Prishtina Insight*, Jan. 6, 2020. <https://prishtinainsight.com/deadline-set-on-formation-of-the-next-government/>.

<sup>37</sup> Former White House Chief Strategist in the Trump administration.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Rossi, 'Partition in Kosovo Will Lead to Disaster', *Foreign Policy*, September 19, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/19/partition-in-kosovo-will-lead-to-disaster-serbia-vucic-thaci-mitrovica-ibar/>.

<sup>39</sup> Scott B. MacDonald, 'Why China and Russia are Vying for Influence Over the Balkans', *The National Interest*, February 7, 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-china-and-russia-are-vying-influence-over-balkans-43852>.

to revisiting several of the eastern frontiers in Europe, namely in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, bypassing any EU position on those matters.

However, given that any territorial partition would only occur if accepted by both Kosovo and Serbia, and given the stance of the major powers, it would seem that the only way to avoid it would be through mutual dialogue involving Serbia and Kosovo in a close relationship with the EU acting in a much more determined manner. That would mean that the EU would need to act as a mediator and not simply as a facilitator. The EU would need to try to enforce the agreements that already exist and monitor their application. This would probably require an EU institution committed to that effect. But, in addition, it would require that all EU member states be supportive of both Serbia and Kosovo EU accession whenever both countries would subject to all the binding agreements in accordance with EU law. This is particularly important given that both Serbia and Kosovo may at some point become sceptical that they will get to join the EU, anytime soon if ever. This will not be an easy task for the EU given its present challenges and uncertainties.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article addressed the possibility of Pristina and Belgrade accepting to change Kosovo's borders and its likely consequences for peace in the Balkans. This follows many attempts to reach a final and enduring peace solution after the war in 1999, Kosovo's declaration of independence and the Ahtisaari Plan. The issue of territorial partition is a complex one and one that necessarily has several implications in terms of the risks involved and in terms of the benefits for achieving a stable solution for the region. There are many arguments for and against territorial partition that have been put forward, notwithstanding the obvious geostrategic interests involved on the part of the main powers. At any event, the greatest risk with territorial partition is that war resurges as some of the population does not accept partition and that populations in other regions within the Balkans also want a partition of their territories. An alternative solution to partition would seem to involve less risk and, in time, lead to peace in the region. This could probably be best achieved through a more ascertained and determined involvement of the EU, with the involvement of NGOs that would provide the conditions for democratic development and economic growth with the prospects of EU membership in the near future.

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