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## EU FEARS OF BALKAN GHOSTS AT KOSOVO-SERBIA BORDER CHANGES

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**D**iscussions between Serbia and Kosovo about the possibility of agreeing on border adjustments to settle a solution to the current frozen situation will be ephemeral, a short-lived romance. Not because the presidents of both countries could not finally agree on a deal, but because Europeans suspect the return of ‘Balkan ghosts’. The proposal discomforts the European Union and its member states. International leaders and analysts have already demonised this option, condemned their consequences and warned that another tragedy might befall Balkan people.

The weekend of September 8 and 9, Serbia’s president, Aleksandar Vučić, made a trip to Kosovo. On Saturday, he visited the Gazivode Lake – located in the majority-Serb northwest region, which is strategic for the supply of water and electricity. On Sunday, he had plans to go to the majority-Serb village of Banje, located south of the Ibar River, but over 200 Kosovo demonstrators blocked the road with trucks, tractors and car tires set on fire. Arguing security concerns, the Kosovo government decided to cancel Vučić’s visit to Banje. The Serbian president returned to the northern part of Kosovo, where he gave a fairly reconciliatory speech and bemoaned that a **final agreement** was still far away.

Two days earlier, Vučić had already cancelled on short notice a meeting in Brussels with his Kosovo’s counterpart, president Hashim Thaçi, after talking bilaterally with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The reasons for cancelling are unclear; apparently Vučić had explained Mogherini what he considered Pristina’s lies from recent days. These negotiating rounds are part of the **EU-facilitated dialogue** initiated in 2013 with the aim to normalize relations between Belgrade and Pristina as a condition for joining the EU. After Vučić cancelled, it was Thaçi who appeared conciliatory and **regretted** the lack of progress: ‘The current frozen conflict is unsustainable, so we need to move forward, so we can realise a Euro-Atlantic future for Kosovo and a European future for Serbia’.

The two presidents are expected to discuss territorial swaps, in which allegedly Kosovo will give parts of north Kosovo to Serbia in exchange of the Presevo valley and Serbia’s recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. The idea is still incipient and lacks concreteness, but has haunted the EU-led rounds of talks since Vučić insinuated it to the media in July. He **suggested** that border correction was a possibility, justifying that even if Kosovo would no longer be a province

of Serbia, at least some territory would be kept. Surprisingly, Taçi seemed to be ready to talk about this and he made a similar offer. As he tweeted in August 6: 'My proposal for a peaceful solution with Serbia is clear: no partition along ethnic lines, but yes to the border adjustment and mutual recognition'. Both presidents seem to be adopting pragmatic strategies with the intention to attain a European future. They play politics at home, too. In their public account of the negotiations, each one of them claims to be the winner and is only the other interlocutor who loses: whereas Vučić underlines that Serbia would gain the north of Kosovo, Taçi boasts that there will be mutual recognition and the possibility to add the Presevo valley. The options, as well as the deal, are opened; and opened will remain.

Critics inside Serbia and Kosovo have opposed the proposal of territorial swaps. The opposition in Belgrade, albeit divided and feeble at the moment, claims that Vučić is selling Kosovo for too little. In Kosovo, people mobilized in the streets of Pristina at the beginning of September. In the Assembly, the opposition parties **mistrust** the deal. Avdullah Hoti, from the Democratic League of Kosovo, argues that Taçi's proposals are not constitutional and foresees that border correction would be tragic for the citizens in the regions involved. Albin Kurti, leader of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje, stated that the deal would not benefit the interests of the people in Kosovo and compared both presidents to autocrats, accusing them of treating territories as their own private lands. The opposition is unhappy about the piece of cake their people will have if a deal is set.

But the fiercest opposition is coming from outside, where many politicians and commentators read border adjustment as an euphemism for partition. In a recent conference in Berlin, chancellor **Angela Merkel** warned that 'the territorial integrity of the states of the Western Balkans has been established and is inviolable'. Merkel emphasized the point as if people in the Balkans would never learn the lesson: 'This has to be said again and again because again and again there are attempts to perhaps talk about borders and we can't do that'. The **British embassy** in Kosovo also protested: 'The calls for the correction of the national borders could be a destabilising factor'. Influential European **academics** have criticized the plan for partitioning Kosovo too, auguring the revival of ethno-nationalism and tragedy to the people who will be left in the 'wrong' side of the border.

However, other foreign observers have endorsed the possibility of border swaps, like John Bolton, US President Donald Trump's national security advisor. Most importantly, confronting Merkel's views, the EU's enlargement commissioner, **Johannes Hahn**, argued that the European Union would support any solution reached by Serbia and Kosovo, without excluding border swaps. But it is difficult that he keeps this stance for long since he added that 'the overarching goal is **stability** in the region', and stability is a word that averts political debate and steps forward. In addition, the European mood is against any proposal that involves an abrupt change in the map. EU members do not wish any precedents that could encourage border claims in provinces at home. Finally, three former **High Representatives** for Bosnia have written a letter to Mogherini and pleaded not to endorse proposals involving territorial changes. Historically, international observers who have shown the deepest distrust of the Balkan people's capacity of coexistence have defended **partition** and transfer of population. Yet, today, when the proposal is coming from the Balkans, analysts attacking the possibility of border swaps are wary of the people's capacities to negotiate, too.

Border correction seems a phantasmagorical idea, as it would certainly carry unpleasant risks. The key issue highlighted here, however, is not whether border corrections are legitimate or a preferred solution, but whether Belgrade and Pristina are entitled to meaningful negotiations. The proposals these days, with the counterproposals and critiques by opposition parties, bring something new on the table: new imaginaries that aim at bringing the Balkan people closer to peace and

to EU membership, which is (so far) desired by most. Yet possibilities for agreements dim, as European leaders like chancellor Merkel discard certain options. As final solutions and agreements can not satisfy everyone, at best the EU and its member states intend to influence any proposal coming from Balkan politicians. At worst, they foster frozen conflicts or perennial negotiations, rather than agreements. What the EU should avoid is just the publication of another photo of Balkan leaders in the same room and a headline stating that a next meeting -without concrete proposals- is on the horizon.