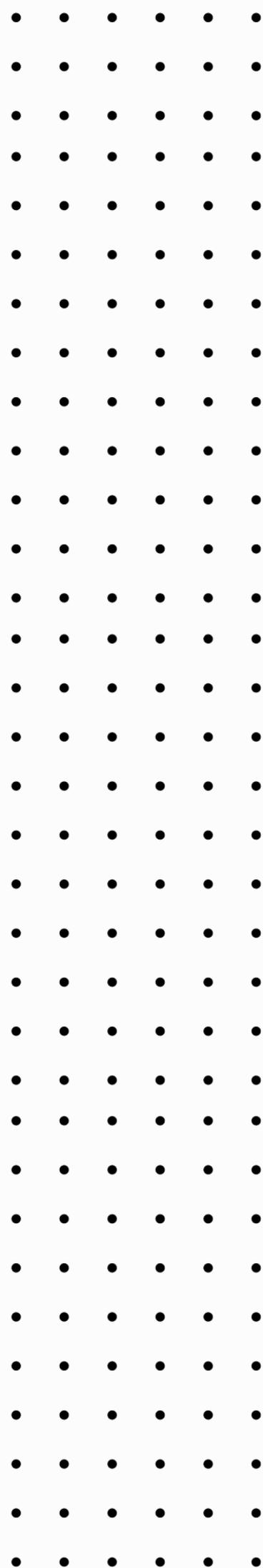


# **NEW HOPE ON THE HORIZON? THE BELGRADE-PRISTINA DIALOGUE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRUGGLE TOWARDS A DIPLOMATIC VICTORY**

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Recently, officials from Kosovo and Serbia confirmed the existence of a new Franco-German proposal, allegedly promising a solution to the long-lasting Dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, if agreed upon by the two parties in dispute. While the proposal is not public, if realised, the new initiative could bring an important impulse for further discussion between Serbia and Kosovo, a crucial aspect in their EU accession paths. But why is this mutual agreement so important, and why does it represent such a struggle for the diplomacy of the European Union?

Disagreements over the status of Kosovo represent a very deep and complicated issue. As predominantly ethnically Albanian, Kosovo was given an autonomous status after WWII and unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008. The EU was given patronage over the mediation between the two countries in 2010,<sup>1</sup> leading to the start of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue a year later. This was seen as a great opportunity because a successful mediation of such a complicated issue would prove that the EU can be an important international actor. But 11 years later, the Union is still waiting for its great diplomatic victory.

The main role in the Dialogue was entrusted to the newly-formed diplomatic hub European External Action Service (EEAS) and its head, the Union's High Representative (HR). We can say that this choice was strategic. When we look at the internal foreign policy division inside the EU, we see that the enlargement process (which plays an important role in the Dialogue) is led by the Commission, whereas the Member States (MSs) control the overall Common Foreign Policy, which requires their unanimous voting in the Council. In this context, it is especially problematic as 5 MSs do not recognise Kosovo as a sovereign state (Spain,

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1 Jeta Krasniqi. "EU-mediated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue: A new attempt or resumption with the old approach", 2020, available: [https://www.academia.edu/44309512/EU\\_mediated\\_Kosovo\\_Serbia\\_dialogue\\_A\\_new\\_attempt\\_or\\_resumption\\_with\\_the\\_old\\_approach](https://www.academia.edu/44309512/EU_mediated_Kosovo_Serbia_dialogue_A_new_attempt_or_resumption_with_the_old_approach).

Romania, Cyprus, Slovakia, and Greece). Therefore, the EEAS is supposed to improve and connect the Union's external coordination and at the same time represent a "neutral" approach towards the Dialogue.

I consider the Dialogue to be an especially important case for EU diplomacy. It was the first effort mediated solely by HR and EEAS. In a way, the first HR Catherine Ashton achieved a diplomatic victory that she badly needed<sup>2</sup> because the newly-created diplomatic agency had to prove its added value. And EEAS indeed managed to dispel some of its criticism. Taking the Dialogue as an example, it became evident that the HR can contribute to promoting the consistency of EU policy effectiveness and guarantee coherent representation of EU positions in relation to Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning, EU mediators actively shaped the Dialogue and successfully drafted agreements without the prior consent of all MSs.<sup>4</sup> Brussels Agreement of 2013 was seen as a great achievement, and considered by many as the final answer.<sup>5</sup> This sensitive deal sought the establishment of an association/community of Serbian municipalities in northern Kosovo under the authorities in Pristina.<sup>6</sup> However, when the Dialogue became officially political, the EEAS and its second HR Federica Mogherini found themselves restricted. In order to satisfy all participants, the provisions of the Brussels Agreement were made

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2 Steven Blockmans. "Facilitated dialogue in the Balkans vindicates the EEAS", CEPS Commentary, April 2013, available: [http://aei.pitt.edu/41994/1/S\\_Blockmans\\_Commentary\\_EU\\_facilitated\\_dialogue.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/41994/1/S_Blockmans_Commentary_EU_facilitated_dialogue.pdf).

3 Maria Viceré. "Looking towards the East: the High Representative's role in EU foreign policy on Kosovo and Ukraine", European Security, August 2020, available: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09662839.2020.1798405>.

4 Dorde Dimitrov. "The European Union as the Mediator in Belgrade-Pristina dialogue: What influenced mediation effectiveness?", Charles University, June 2021.

5 Maria Viceré. "The roles of the President of the European Council and the High Representative in leading EU foreign policy on Kosovo", Journal of European Integration, July 2016, available: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07036337.2016.1178255?needAccess=true>.

6 Martina Szpala. "Serbia-Kosovo negotiations - playing for time under pressure from the West", OSW, August 2018, available: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-08-21/serbia-kosovo-negotiations-playing-time-under-pressure-west-0>.

vague and unclear, making the deal extremely difficult to implement.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, after the Brexit referendum and migration crisis, EU MSs moved towards anti-enlargement positions.<sup>8</sup> Without a strong “carrot” at her disposal in the form of an EU accession promise, Mogherini was not able to push the parties back to the negotiating table nor able to implement the existing agreements.

The Dialogue was resurrected in June 2020 under the third HR Josep Borrell after being frozen for 20 months. Since that moment, the EU has been represented by a Special Envoy for the Dialogue Miroslav Lajčák (an EEAS official), who will most likely also be responsible for the implementation of the Franco-German proposal if it takes place. No real progress has been made since his appointment, and that's why this new initiative is very anticipated and desperately needed. His dependence on the MSs is a huge factor limiting the diplomatic potential of the EU. Without the necessary power, HR and the Special Representative cannot bring such a challenging process beyond a technical level.

It is obvious that the EU's approach in the past decade is not working. Instead of creating solutions, the normalisation process fuels nationalist sentiments and increases tensions between the two countries, as the Dialogue is being used for aggressive narratives by the political elites of Serbia and Kosovo. Especially the journey towards EU membership, which slowed down with various EU internal crises since 2016, is negatively affecting public opinion. It became evident that the EU cannot use the incentive of EU accession in the Dialogue if it cannot credibly fulfil its promises to deliver results.

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<sup>7</sup> K. Gashi, V. Musli, J. Orbie. “Mediation Through Recontextualization: The European Union and The Dialogue Between Kosovo and Serbia”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 2017, available: <https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/8554525/file/8554529.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Katarina Cukovic. “Europe’s diplomacy on public display: The EU and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue”, *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2019, available: [http://www.contemporarysee.org/sites/default/files/papers/cukovic\\_belgrade\\_pristina\\_dialogue.pdf](http://www.contemporarysee.org/sites/default/files/papers/cukovic_belgrade_pristina_dialogue.pdf).

And that is why the Franco-German proposal can be potentially important. It seems that the EU countries finally realised that the enlargement is possibly the only “carrot” that can lead the parties towards a final agreement. According to available information, the plan should allegedly include a new normalisation agreement to be signed in 2023, under which Serbia would “accept the reality of independent Kosovo” in exchange for financial aid, but would only formally recognise its full independence in around 10 years, when the EU enlargement could be realistic. It is evident that vague definitions and promises are no longer an option, and a more proactive and direct approach needs to be taken. Only time will tell if the Franco-German initiative will bring the long-anticipated result and a victory for EU diplomacy, or if it is yet just another false alarm.

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