



# BULLETIN

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## Albanian–Serbian Political Games: Is There a Win-Win Solution?

Tomasz Żornaczuk

*The suspended dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, an abandoned football match between Serbia and Albania, and a postponed visit by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to Belgrade have all contributed to worsening the perplexing relations between the Albanian and Serbian nations. Given the ambitions of Serbia, Albania and Kosovo to join the European Union, regional cooperation between the nations needs to be improved, and a strong message from the meeting of the two prime ministers in November would help place the reconciliation process on the right track.*

**Football Anti-Diplomacy.** The recent deterioration of relations between Albania and Serbia is a direct aftermath of a football match held between the two countries in Belgrade in mid-October. A drone with a map of “a great Albania” (that—except for Kosovo—also includes parts of Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) was sent by the Albanian fans to circle around the stadium. This caused riots with supporters of the home team, who invaded the pitch and attacked the visiting players, leading to the game being abandoned. What was seen by the Serbian politicians as a provocation from the Albanian side was somewhat praised in Tirana: the footballers were welcomed by the minister for sports and received by the president of the republic.

The event caused further aggression outside the stadium. In the following days, nearly a dozen of small Albanian businesses (such as bakeries and similar) were attacked in Serbia. Moreover, there was an attempt to torch the mosque in Subotica. Protests and incidents were also seen in Podgorica. On the other hand, there were several attacks on Serbian houses, and flags of Serbia were burned in Kosovo. This was accompanied by the Albanian and Serbian politicians blaming each other for the events during the game and later, with an eventual call by Edi Rama for the Serbian authorities to recognise Kosovo as an independent country. Controversial political statements from both sides were enough to postpone the long-awaited visit of Rama to Belgrade planned for 22 October, which would have been the first official visit of an Albanian prime minister to Serbia since 1946. It took both prime ministers a week to present a joint declaration to solve the bilateral problems through dialogue, and to reschedule the visit for 10 November, an action that could have been hard to undertake without encouragement from Germany and the United States.

Although “greater Albania” is not part of the political agenda in Albania or in Kosovo, there are political parties in both countries that openly support the idea. While the List of Natural Albania is a marginal political party not represented in the parliament in Tirana, the Self-determination party is the third largest political power in the Kosovo assembly, with 16 out of 120 members. Some voices of support for the idea also come regularly from elsewhere in the region, for instance, from Macedonian religious leaders representing the local Albanian Muslims. A recent example of an attempt to bring more territories under Albanian control was the proclamation of the Republic of Ilirida in Skopje, which would cover part of Macedonia, in September. Even though the event was marginal, it yet again reveals the Albanian territorial ambitions in neighbouring countries, which is a potential threat to stability in the whole region.

**Pending Serbia–Kosovo Dialogue.** The fact that dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina under the auspices of the EU has been almost non-existent in 2014 does nothing to reduce the mistrust between Serbs and Albanians. This is because of the electoral period in both countries in the first part of the year, and the lack of a new government in Pristina, although the elections were held nearly five months ago. The dialogue with Serbia is one of the division lines

on the Kosovan political scene, with a negative approach to the issue held by the Self-determination party, seemingly a political player with the wide ability to form a coalition with both the governmental political parties and the opposition. However, its radical statement to break dialogue with Belgrade and to revise the implementation of previously reached agreements would be an obvious obstacle for any future government, and to the European integration of the country.

Except for much constitutional ambiguity in Kosovo over the formation of the new parliament and the government, the position of the third-biggest political party in this country shows that building better relations with Serbia is not a goal of the entire political scene in Pristina. If consensus over the formulation of Kosovo's new government, with a clear political will to continue the dialogue with Belgrade, is not reached by the end of the year, it will probably cause a fresh parliamentary election and prolong the stalemate in Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, upon which integration with the EU for both countries is conditional.

**What Poland and the EU Could Do.** The recent events of the football match and its aftermath show how fragile Albanian-Serbian relations are, and how easily activity on the social level can influence the political agenda of cooperation between the two countries. Although the authorities in Belgrade praised the police for their professional action during the match, the event actually revealed the weak coordination of the security measures because radical football fans were able to enter the stadium and later to attack the players on the pitch. It is also evident that there is a need to amend the law regarding access to the sports events for potentially dangerous fans. Good practices regarding both problems were shared by Poland with Croatia in the past. It seems appropriate to pass on similar know-how to Serbian partners, within the framework of sharing good transformation experience with those countries aspiring to enter the EU. Moreover, a lesson from the event should be learned by the Albanian authorities, who are responsible for security of the home game between the two teams, scheduled for October 2015, in order to prevent similar problems. On the other hand, there is a need for the EU and Member States to voice clear condemnation of calls for greater nation states in the Balkans, if the union is willing to continue its acceptance of no border change in the region.

The deterioration of relations between the Albanians and Serbs falls at a moment when both countries have made visible progress in integration with the EU. It should therefore be even more in their mutual interests to boost relations and work on fostering regional cooperation, which is a well-known condition for EU accession. Therefore, the meeting between the two prime ministers should be used not only to jointly clear up any negative fallout of the recent events, but also to send a strong message looking towards future cooperation between the nations. On one hand, it is worth underlining that sports events should serve as an opportunity to reinforce shaky bilateral relations, a phenomenon well known in Europe and elsewhere, sometimes referred to as football diplomacy. On the other hand, there is a clear need to build more examples of good people to people contacts. In fact, outside Kosovo, the Serbs and the Albanians do not know each other, and this is a notorious source of misunderstanding and dislike. A declaration of political support for more joint social activities, including those of a cultural nature, such as the Balkans Beyond Borders project, could be a favourable factor to energise youth exchanges and interactions aimed at better understanding and a quicker reconciliation between the nations.

Kosovo remains the main open question between the two nations. At the same time, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has been recognised as a good example of improvement of bilateral relations in the Balkans. The recent participation of Kosovo's ministers of foreign affairs and of economic development in a regional meeting in Belgrade is evidence of the political will to tighten cooperation within the framework of existing agreements. Dialogue is also a key tool for joint efforts to improve Albanians' and Serbs' mutual perceptions of each other, and therefore it is of great importance that it continues to be operational. It is in Kosovo's interests to create a government able to conduct talks with Belgrade and that is open to compromises. Furthermore, it is important that new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini is an active broker in the dialogue—one of the flagship policies of former envoy Catherine Ashton in this respect. EU Member States should therefore support a strong mandate for the EU representative on this matter, and also support both Serbia and Kosovo in their attempts to normalise their relations by promoting the values that can be brought to the region only by a successful reconciliation process.