

SERBIA | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

POLITICAL

In March and April, Serbian politics were still dominated by the government building process and the Kosovo status negotiations. On 26 March, the final Kosovo status proposal was presented to the UN Security Council (UNSC) in a closed-door session. The UN Secretary-General (UNSG), the EU, NATO and the US all endorsed Ahtisaari's plan, which proposes supervised independence for Kosovo. The Serbian government, supported by Russia, China and some other states, called for further negotiations because they claimed that the plan was not based on real negotiations, as none of the over 100 amendments to the plan proposed by the Serbian negotiation team were accepted. In the UNSC meeting on 3 April, Russia reiterated that it would only support a solution accepted by both Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. Russia also suggested sending a Security Council mission to Serbia and Kosovo to collect additional information before discussing Kosovo's future. This fact-finding mission took place on 25-28 April. Belgium's UN Ambassador Verbeke led representatives from the 15 Security Council members to Belgrade, Prishtina, Mitrovica and some Albanian and Serb villages. On the Kosovo border, roughly 10-12,000 Kosovo Serbs demonstrated, claiming they could not return to their homes in Kosovo. Verbeke reported to the UN that the participants of the mission needed time to make up their minds about the situation before deciding on Kosovo's future. The Russian Ambassador to the UN, Lavrov, stated that the mission has clearly proven that Kosovo cannot become independent under the circumstances and that Resolution 1244 must be fulfilled before the UN can draft another one. The EU and the US have called for the quick adoption of the new resolution, as this would bring stability to the whole region. Indeed, it is dangerous to keep the status quo for too long because on both the Serb and the Albanian sides, there are groups calling for armed resistance. The establishment of the Serb paramilitary group "Guards of the Tsar Lazar" on 5 May received a lot of attention and concern. Many Serbian politicians called on the group not to mobilize people. This group seems to be largely a publicity stunt. Without state support it is unlikely to become a serious factor. With a change in Serbian government policy, however, such groups might become a more serious threat to stability.

In light of the incompatible positions of the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian elites, Alfred Gusenbauer, Chancellor of Austria, has proposed the partition of Kosovo – a solution that until lately constituted a taboo in international discussions. This is particularly relevant to the two predominantly Albanian-populated municipalities of South Serbia. The Albanian political elite in Bujanovac and Presevo disagree on the future of the municipalities. Some promote secession from Serbia; others opt for the status quo in terms of borders. Further negotiations on Kosovo do not seem unlikely anymore as the UNSC seems to be more divided on the issue than the EU and US have expected. If the UNSC does pass a new UN resolution, this will not happen earlier than June.

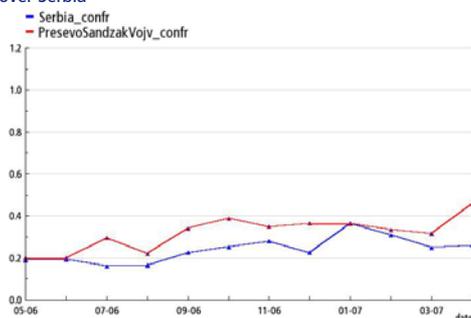
With the Kosovo status decision looming, the DSS, in contrast to the DS and G17plus, is not interested in forming a government quickly, in spite of the constitutional cabinet building deadline of 14 May and pressure from abroad, mainly from the EU. By early May coalition talks between DSS, DS and G17 have largely broken down and Tomislav Nikolic of the Radical Party was elected as president of parliament with the support of the DSS deputies. In March, discussions focused on the so-called sixth and zero principles. The sixth principle advocated by G17 plus and the DSS maintains that the DS can have either the post of prime minister or of president. The zero principle, which the DS brought forward as a reaction to the proposal by the two other parties, states that if the prime minister and the president posts have to be shared between the two parties, then they have to share posts on all levels – including local assemblies and municipal administrations, which implies that the DSS would have to break up their local coalitions with the Radicals. Moreover, the DS maintains that one party can occupy both posts because the president is directly elected and therefore cannot be subject to government building negotiations. Most importantly, however, the parties do not agree on how to divide the ministries, especially the ministry of the interior and the intelligence service.

SECURITY

The security situation has worsened during the past two months. As depicted in the graph below, the situation in the Presevo Valley, Sandzak and Vojvodina has deteriorated remarkably. In April, there has been an abrupt increase of relative confrontational events. This development can be explained through the following events:

Both in March and April, there have been an increasing number of attacks and threats towards minorities, mostly in the Presevo Valley, Sandzak and Vojvodina. Examples are the vandalizing of the Croatian educational center

Relative confrontational events in Presevo Valley, Sandzak and Vojvodina compared to relative confrontational events all over Serbia



Source: FAST event data

in Subotica, repeated attacks against the Adventist church in Novi Sad, and several graffiti with Nazi and nationalist content, mostly in Vojvodina. In Presevo Valley, Albanian fighters, allegedly coming from Kosovo, attacked a Serb farmer. His property was demolished and his livestock stolen. In Sandzak, the presence of Wahhabis has gained more attention these days: when the police raided a Wahhabi camp near Novi Pazar on 20 April, they were attacked with a hand-grenade. A policeman and a Wahhabi were injured and a Wahhabi leader (Ismail Prenetic) was killed in the shoot-out. At Prenetic's funeral, journalists who wanted to report about the event were attacked. One was injured and his camera was broken. Earlier, the Mayor of Novi Pazar, Sulejman Ugljanin, accused journalists from the Belgrade media of negatively reporting on events in Sandzak and thus to scare off foreign investors.

Other attacks on journalists include the assassination threat on 5 April against Dinko Gruhonjic, the President of the Independent Journalist Association of Vojvodina in Novi Sad; the public assassination threat on Radio Fokus against Milos Vasic in Belgrade on 20 April; and most prominently, the assassination attempt directed towards Dejan Anastasijevic, who had earlier criticized the outcome of the Scorpions trial and who is well-known for investigating the intelligence service for its involvement in wars, killings and kidnapping. This attack received a lot of attention from both Serbian politicians and the public, who expressed their empathy and support for the journalist. All attacks mentioned were reactions to articles that journalists wrote about Serbia's role in the war, the Djindjic case or other similarly sensitive issues. Reacting to these recent events, the OSCE called on the government to ensure the safety of all media professionals in Serbia.

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC

Several strikes and protests were staged during the last two months, mostly in the industrial and public sector. The workers from the Bor mines protested successfully against the government's plan to sell the mines to Kuprom, a Romanian firm, because the terms of the sale were not transparent. Kuprom withdrew from the deal because of the protests.

In Novi Sad, the city council (dominated by the Radical Party) decided to name two streets after Veljko Milanovic and Mladen Bratic, both commanders of the Serbian offensive in Vukovar, Croatia in 1991. The opposition parties of Novi Sad protested vehemently against the decision. The OSCE also criticized the municipal authorities.

The visa relaxation agreement with the EU, which eases the procedures for some applicants (e.g. academics/students, business people, journalists etc.) to acquire visas for EU countries, was postponed again.

OUTLOOK

The currently most important issues for Serbia are the developments in the government building process. If the ruling parties find a compromise until 14 May, the solution could be one of the proposals brought forward by the Democrats (DS) in mid-April: Kostunica will remain prime minister, but the majority of the portfolios and more key ministries (those cited above, plus the defense and the foreign affairs ministries) will go to the DS. Kostunica has not yet shown any readiness for compromise; unlike the DS, which seems willing to negotiate the plans it has already submitted. The DS fears that if no agreement is found by 14 May, either new elections will have to be staged or the DSS could enter into a coalition with the Radicals. This would imply that the DS would not come to power. Therefore, the DS is in the weaker negotiation position and it seems probable that Kostunica will remain prime minister although the DS will not receive all the ministries it has requested. The quicker the government building process can be concluded, the better: the stalemate does not only block further reforms necessary for meeting the requirements for EU integration, but it also has economic and social implications. If there is no agreement between DS, DSS and G17plus on government formation, a quick reform process cannot be expected and, most probably, new elections will have to be staged.

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