



KEEP EYES AND MINDS WIDE OPEN WHEN DEALING WITH SERBIA INDEED!

Serbia case study by Jelena Milic, Director of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, Belgrade, based on her assessment of October 2019 report “Five Principles for U.S. Special Envoy to Guide the Peace Talks Between Kosovo and Serbia” by Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis of the Heritage Foundation. In the said report, among other things, the authors invite Ambassador Richard Grenell, the new U.S. envoy for Belgrade –Pristina peace talks, to be patient with Kosovo’s progress and to keep eyes wide open when dealing with Serbia.

Introduction:

Belgrade and Pristina are under strong pressure by the political West to come up with a comprehensive agreement on their future relations in very complicated internal, regional and global circumstances. The expectations and the pressure are well founded bearing in mind that that the formalization of relations, based on a mutually acceptable compromise, will actually be a cornerstone for sustained normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, continuation of democratization of both entities, and would significantly reduce possibilities of third parties to exercise influence that do not contribute to stabilization and democratization of the entire region, and its stronger integration into transatlantic structures.

In last two years, numerous articles and reports have been published by think tanks and individuals coming from the political West, or by local experts and NGOs usually funded by Western structures, governments, international organizations, private foundations and corporations. I have read a lot of them, and have tracked several similarities and unintentional or deliberate biases that most of them spread, in particular those that vehemently but without good arguments oppose adjustment of border between Belgrade and Pristina as one potential element of a multidimensional, comprehensive agreement that should have economic, political and security components. Let me repeat: A mutually agreed-upon adjustment of borders is not ethnic division, but merely a division along the lines of significant strategic locations and economic resources placed in four small municipalities in North Kosovo that are legitimate subjects of interest for Belgrade and Pristina.¹ Bigger number of Serbs in Kosovo live in other six municipalities in Kosovo. A mutually agreed-upon adjustment of borders between Pristina and Belgrade would not generate a trend towards mono-ethnic states, as several prominent NGOs falsely claimed in the letter to outgoing EU High Representative Frederica Mogherini from August 2018 – there are more than twenty five registered ethnicities that live in Serbia, Albanians included. A similar situation exists in Kosovo. It is not true that border adjustments between Pristina and Belgrade would inevitably cause any kind of a domino effect, or violence

¹ WEST SIDE STORY. CEAS Report. June 2018. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/west-side-story>

and wars. Nor it would cause “peaceful ethnic cleansing”, as tendentiously implied by some², either, as there is no indication of any prepared movements of the small populations that would be affected. Moreover, these populations would be compensated in case of objections, like in any other eminent domain circumstances.

The compromise agreement between Pristina and Belgrade would be backed by the EU and the U.S, and would be reached in the presence of the large number of peacekeeping troops in the region. Border adjustments would contribute to a comprehensive deal that would have a broader positive impact on the entire region. The announcement of a clearer EU enlargement commitment to the Western Balkans in the short-term would additionally disperse concerns about negative effects.

Some of the mentioned reports contain unhidden despise for the policies and personality of current U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration, as well as Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic letting this overshadow any meaningful analysis.³ Others romanticize the situation in Kosovo and falsify reality, by conveniently failing to mention very relevant facts and circumstances or refusing to hold political actors in Pristina to the same standard that they hold political actors in Belgrade and other regional capitals⁴. Sometime I am under an impression that these reports are written in a very short time without due diligence, based on outdated facts and narratives, and undoubtedly without proper assessment of the benefits that an improvement in Serbia –U.S. relations can have not only for Serbia but for the Western Balkans, EU, NATO and the U.S. Some are written to appease or fulfill donors’ policies and probably are affected by countries of origin of the grant makers, or to boast stands of the governments that rolled the money, not to realistically present viable options that can get democratic validation. Oddly enough same authors frequently accuse political West for opting in favor of stabilization instead of democratization in their dealings with the Western Balkans.

Recent developments with regard Ukraine and various U.S. actors show how complicated it is, even for a much bigger country like Ukraine, to navigate various influences and expectations coming from various U.S. stakeholders, even governmental ones.

Bearing in mind that the report “Five Principles for U.S. Special Envoy to Guide Peace Talks Between Kosovo and Serbia”⁵ by Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis, is written by respected authors associated with the prominent and influential Heritage Foundation and that it is the first report that addresses the recent appointment of Ambassador Richard Grenell as a new envoy for the Belgrade –Pristina peace talks, I have decided to go through it – line by line- and to in good faith point to the places that I think contain mistakes and draw attention to relevant facts that the authors have failed to mention.

² An Offensive Plan for the Balkans That the U.S. Should Get Behind. By Charles A. Kupchan. The New York Times. September 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/opinion/kosovo-serbia-land-swap.html>

³ The Hypnotist – Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton and the return of the past. ESI. April 2019. Available at: https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=194

⁴ False: Russia’s OSCE Rep Claims Kosovo a Failed ‘Quasi-State Entity’. Polygraph info. September 2019. Available at: <https://www.polygraph.info/a/false-russia-s-osce-rep-claims-kosovo-a-failed-quasi-state-entity-/30175588.html?fbclid=IwAR2sESVG8HlenLpCY1y1T5OWGJhm8jwrStjLAGhwWNqC6h9OfhTJ2dBNHI8>

⁵ Five Principles for U.S. Special Envoy to Guide Peace Talks Between Kosovo and Serbia. By Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis. The Heritage Foundation. October 2019. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/five-principles-us-special-envoy-guide-peace-talks-between-kosovo-and-serbia>

Excerpts from the Heritage Foundation report are in italics. CK is used to identify for Coffey - Kochis for the sake of clarity for every segment of their report, and JM for my comments.

The Heritage Foundation report starts with a summary and key takeaways.

(CK) SUMMARY Since the 1990s, the U.S. has sacrificed significant blood and treasure to ensure that the Balkans remain peaceful and stable—and therefore should have a say in any major development in the region. This is why the appointment of U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell to serve as U.S. Special Envoy for peace talks between Kosovo and Serbia is an important move. Ambassador Grenell must be mindful of the fact that nothing in the Balkans is easy or straightforward, tinkering with borders is a bad idea, working with European countries in the region increases the likelihood of success, and that the U.S. should be patient with Kosovo and remain conscious that Serbia is Russia's foothold in the Balkans.

KEY TAKEAWAYS The U.S. has sacrificed blood and treasure since the 1990s to ensure that the Balkans are peaceful—and should have a say in any major developments in the region. Working with European allies, the Special Envoy can support negotiations by being patient with Kosovo, being realistic about Serbia, and disavowing land swaps. The appointment of Ambassador Grenell as U.S. Special Envoy for peace talks between Kosovo and Serbia sends the right message of continued U.S. engagement.

I kindly ask you to read the summary and key takeaways once again, after you read my remarks.

(JM) The report starts with a mistake.

(CK) The U.S. has sacrificed significant blood and treasure since the 1990s to ensure that the Balkans remain peaceful and stable—and should have a say in any major development in the region.

(JM) The U.S. has not invested much blood in Balkans, and not any in the Kosovo – Serbia war, something former Prime Minister of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj also falsely claimed in his op-ed in the Washington Post from November 2018.⁶ Money and other resources yes, blood no. The U.S. should and does have a saying in any major development in the region not only because of its positive role in stopping the wars of nineties and helping the region stabilize and democratize. At the same time, today, all countries in the Western Balkans are willingly at various stages of the EU integration process and most are in the process of accession to NATO as well, or are already member-states. This is a major difference from nineties and must be taken into consideration when deliberating about future solutions to outstanding issues. The countries of the region on much healthier grounds today than they did prior to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and

⁶ Kosovo's prime minister: We will not accept Serbia's violation of our sovereignty. The Washington Post. November 2018. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/11/28/kosovos-prime-minister-we-will-not-accept-serbias-violation-of-our-sovereignty/>

the wars of the nineties, and they are more structurally integrated. Additionally, there is a significant number of peace keeping troops deployed in UN, EU and NATO led missions. Any local tailor-made solution to outstanding issues would not be executed in a hostile manner and environment, and would leverage the significant international presence that exists to help its implementation without negative consequences.

As the U.S. has troops in these missions, supports EU and NATO integration of the countries of the region, and cooperates and participates in many aspects of these processes with NATO and EU, it should have one of the biggest says in all major developments on these grounds as well, not solely on the basis of its role in the nineties. Moreover, several developments did not exist or play a major role back in nineties that are significantly shaping the current state of the affairs in the region and Europe (Putin's Russia increased interest and influence, China's increased interest and actions, refugees and immigration crisis, rise of populism in Europe, EU enlargement fatigue to mention just a few). Stronger U.S. involvement in resolution of the Macedonia-Greece name dispute, reestablishment of better relations between the U.S. and Greece, and a U.S. push for Montenegro NATO accession are most welcome features that came in a critical time of the EU losing its role as the key actor in the region. The Trump administration can claim at least partial credit for all of this.

(CK) This is why the appointment of U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell to serve as U.S. Special Envoy for peace talks between Kosovo and Serbia is an important move.

Amb. Grenell's appointment was a welcomed and logical next move. But it cannot be analyzed without taking into the consideration that it followed the appointment of an experienced and hugely respected diplomat with substantial experience in the region, Mr. Matthew Palmer as the U.S. State Department's Envoy for the entire Western Balkans. This indicates that the solution to Kosovo-Serbia further relation will be carefully assessed and eventually executed along the lines of other long standing policies of the U.S. in the Region, predominantly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia or related to dealing with the war crimes legacy of the nineties everywhere in the region.

(CK) In order to be successful, Ambassador Grenell must be mindful that nothing in the Balkans is easy or straightforward, tinkering with borders is a bad idea, working with European countries in the region increases the likelihood of success, and that the U.S. should be patient with Kosovo and remain conscious that Serbia is Russia's foothold in the Balkans.

Apart from reiterating that we are discussing an eventual multidimensional and comprehensive solution, that should have economic, political and security components, in a much different atmosphere than the one of the nineties, when even Serbia's neighbors Romania and Bulgaria where not members of NATO, the argument about "tinkering with borders" does not hold water for several more reasons. Was tinkering with borders a bad idea when Kosovo unilaterally declared independence in 2008 from Serbia? How about Montenegro's quest for independence from the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia a few years before it?

The U.S. does work with the European countries and EU institutions, although it is not easy, bearing in mind the existence of diverging positions on Kosovo's independence and a way

forward. The authors, similar to others who have recently published opinions and reports about Kosovo fail to mention that 5 EU (4 NATO) member states have not recognized Kosovo, to mention (Margarita Assenova⁷) wildly spread lack of will among various Kosovo actors to prosecute war crimes committed against Serbs and other non-Albanians in Kosovo⁸ or to genuinely support international structures tasked to carry on that job, and there are no signs that they will do this anytime soon.

Additionally, EU member-states and institutions are deeply self-absorbed with their own challenges, from Brexit to France's new conditions towards enlargement policies,⁹ that will most likely put on hold even the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, and further blur the prospects of EU full-fledged membership for a country that has opened most of the negotiation chapters like Montenegro. The lack of clear membership perspective is especially painful for official Belgrade, as well as Washington and Brussels as they push for a solution on Kosovo while trying to credibly argue that a solution will accelerate Serbian EU membership.

Additionally, the European Parliament's recent rejection of France's candidate for a commissioner, following two previous rejections, suggests that Ursula von der Leyen's Commission will not be in office before at best December 2019.

All this mean that the U.S. should try to set the roadmap for the deal on its own too. This roadmap must be one that official Belgrade can sell to its voters as an acceptable compromise and that can get democratic support (2/3 majority in the Serbian Parliament) needed for constitutional changes.

(CK) Kosovo's Road to Independence

Kosovo is a small country in the western Balkans with a history rooted in complex relations between different ethnic and religious groups. Kosovo is predominantly secular Sunni-Muslim and has a majority ethnically Albanian population. It is roughly the size of Delaware and has a population about the size of West Virginia's.

As a result of war in the late 1990s, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peacekeeping force, called Kosovo Force (KFOR), maintains 4,000 troops there. At the mission's height the U.S. had 19,000 troops in Kosovo. Today the number is around 685.

It is important to stress here that KFOR is not a NATO mission. Rather, it is a peacekeeping mission authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (UN SC 1244), which tasked NATO to take the lead. The mission contains troops from non-NATO countries, like Austria and Ukraine.

⁷ False: Russia's OSCE Rep Claims Kosovo a Failed 'Quasi-State Entity'. Polygraph info. September 2019. Available at: <https://www.polygraph.info/a/false-russia-s-osce-rep-claims-kosovo-a-failed-quasi-state-entity-/30175588.html>

⁸ Review of Kosovo War Crimes Trials 1999-2018. Humanitarian Law Center Kosovo. October 2018. Available at: <https://www.hlc-kosovo.org/sr/pregled-sudenja-za-ratne-zlocine-na-kosovu-1999-2018-2/>

⁹ French fears of starting negotiations with Albania and N. Macedonia are misplaced. EWB. October 2019. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/14/french-fears-of-starting-negotiations-with-albania-and-n-macedonia-are-misplaced/>

(CK) Following the sectarian wars of the 1990s, Kosovo was placed under United Nations administration in June 1999. On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia and has been recognized by 114 countries, including the United States and all of its neighbors in the Balkans except Serbia, as an independent, sovereign nation.

It is worth noting that Kosovo is not recognized by two members of the Security Council, Russia and China. This is why there are two possible ways of formally reaching an agreement, within UN SC 1244, which has no expiration, or through the adoption of a new UN SC resolution. Bearing in mind that UN SC Resolution 1244 tasked NATO to carry out KFOR mission, which the authors did not properly explain, the mission's legality is linked to one or the other approach.

It is also worth repeating that Kosovo is not recognized by 5 EU member-states 4 of them being NATO member-states, most of them in close geographic proximity to the region: Cyprus, Romania, Greece and Slovakia. The fifth, Spain, has well-known hesitations tied to its own separatist challenges. Romania, as littoral states is curtailed for containment of current escalations of tensions with Russia in the Black Sea. Together with Greece, also a NATO member state, as well Cyprus as EU member state, are extremely relevant partners and members of NATO and EU, especially in turbulent times in Eastern Mediterranean and tensions along trade and sea naval lines worldwide. Add to it new developments with regard Turkey incursion in North East Syria which consequences is hard to predict, as is NATO MSs and NATO responses to it. In such a situation the fact that Serbia improves cooperation with almost all EU/NATO Kosovo's non-recognizers in times when their significance for the Allies common response to challenges grow, gains an additional weight and relevance.

Moreover, in addition to these countries, other major world powers and U.S. partners have not recognized Kosovo, including Mexico, India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, adding up to roughly half of UN member-states. These countries represent approximately two-thirds of the world's population.

(CK) In early November 2018, Kosovo imposed a 10 percent tariff on products made in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia (exempting international brands). Kosovo imposed the tariffs on Serbia over Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's recognition as an independent country. On November 20, 2018, Kosovo's third bid to join Interpol failed to reach the two-thirds vote required for membership. Three days later, Kosovo raised tariffs on products from Serbia from 10 percent to 100 percent due to Serbian opposition to Kosovo joining international organizations, including Interpol. Kosovo's deputy prime minister, Enver Hoxhaj, framed the tariffs as a defensive measure because of Serbia's "aggressive campaign against Kosovo in the int'l stage.

With all due respect to Serbian diplomacy and Serbia's influence around the world, it is wrong to assume that "Serbia's wild campaign" was the only factor affecting the decisions of so many countries that rejected Kosovo's membership in Interpol. The majority of states voted against Kosovo based on their own assessment, pursuing their own interests and what they saw fit for Interpol and its interests. Additionally, why do the author's imply that Kosovo's campaign for recognitions and memberships is acceptable, while Serbia's campaign for non-recognitions is

unacceptable? Since is unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has spent significant time and various resources lobbying countries and institutions around the world to recognize it. There is no provision of the Brussels Agreement or any other agreement between the two parties which stipulates anything about international organizations. The Brussels Agreement states that Kosovo will be included in regional institutions (and Kosovo is now a member of them based on Serbia's acceptance), and that Pristina and Belgrade cannot prevent each other's EU path. Membership in Interpol is not a formal precondition for the EU membership.

(CK) Serbia has argued that the tariffs are a violation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), to which all three nations are parties. European Union officials have confirmed that the tariffs are a "clear violation" of the CEFTA. EU-facilitated dialogue, which since 2011 has sought to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia (initially successful in helping secure a series of technical agreements has in recent years stalled, with the tariff disagreement contributing to the latest impasse since November 2018.

(CK) Serbia

(CK) Serbia has long served as Russia's foothold in the Balkans.

This is a superficial and ultimately incorrect assessment. CEAS has reported extensively on this issue, and has been widely quoted and praised for its work. All reports are available in English at CEAS website: www.ceas-serbia.org.^{10 11} Our reports were quoted in a recent U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report on Russian influence in Europe¹², and in Congressional Research Service reports.¹³ Russian influence in Serbia can be traced to 2008 when the previous Serbian government sold 51% of Serbia's state-owned gas company Serbia gas and petrol industry to Russia's Gazprom. Since then, Russia has started supporting and financing a mockery of open society structures in Serbia, facing, until recently, pretty open door policy by the current ruling structures. Russian influence in Serbia is derived from two factors: (1) the 78-day NATO bombing of 1999, which Russian propaganda exploits and emphasizes in order to keep these events etched into the memory of average Serbians and maintain a wedge between Serbia and the United States;¹⁴ and (2) Russia's status as a veto-wielding member of the UN SC, which Belgrade relies on to keep Kosovo out of the UN until a mutually acceptable compromise is reached between the two parties. Understanding this reliance, Moscow exploits it to blackmail Belgrade, requiring, for example, Serbian officials to categorically state their opposition to NATO membership. Even under these circumstances of extreme pressure from Moscow, when it

¹⁰ BASIC INSTINCT: The Case for More NATO in The Western Balkans. CEAS Report. September 2017. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/6504-ceas-new-report-basic-instinct-the-case-for-more-nato-in-the-western-balkans>

¹¹ EYES WIDE SHUT - STRENGTHENING OF THE RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN SERBIA – GOALS, INSTRUMENTS AND EFFECTS. CEAS Study. May 2016. Available at: https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/publikacije/CEAS_Studija_-_C5%A0irom_zatvorenih_o%C4%8Dju__ENG.pdf

¹² PUTIN'S ASYMMETRIC ASSAULT ON DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA AND EUROPE: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY. Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. State Senate. January 2018. Available at: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>

¹³ U.S. Sanctions on Russia. Congressional Research Service. January 2019. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45415>

¹⁴ FROM MOSCOW WITHOUT LOVE. CEAS Report. March 2019. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/from-moscow-without-love>

comes to substantive policy rather than simple rhetoric, the Serbian government has often rejected the Kremlin's demands, including Russia's near-constant request to give Russian personnel at the joint Serbian-Russian humanitarian center in Nis diplomatic immunity.

It is important to note that there is new evidence that Russia has begun to undermine the current government in Belgrade since it expressed its desire to reach a multidimensional and comprehensive agreement on Kosovo. The authors of the Heritage Foundation report and other Western stakeholders should understand that the only beneficiary of the status quo in Kosovo is Russia.¹⁵ Therefore, those who are generating roadblocks or setting unnecessary conditions for a mutually acceptable and agreed up solution between Belgrade and Pristina are in fact doing Moscow's bidding and helping to maintain the Kremlin's influence in the Balkans. At the same time, Russia has had success in penetrating the Serbian Armed Forces and Intelligence community.¹⁶ The extremely complex issue of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is torn between the Moscow and Istanbul patriarchies, and its huge presence in Kosovo is another mechanism for Russia to obstruct a compromise deal between Belgrade and Pristina, and Russia's relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church must be carefully examined. The Church is a stark opponent to any kind of the compromise solution. President Vucic's efforts to find a solution to Kosovo have been opposed by many officials in the Serbian Orthodox Church. This opposition is based on a toxic combination of genuine conviction and money from Moscow.

(CK) Serbia is a fellow religiously orthodox nation with which Russia enjoys a close economic, political, and military relationship. Serbia and Russia have an agreement allowing Russian soldiers to be based at Niš airport in Serbia.

This is not true. The Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs made a deal with the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations. So, formally they are not Russian soldiers. Russia has been demanding a diplomatic status for the "Russia-Serbia Humanitarian Center" and diplomatic immunity for its personnel there but the Serbian government has continually rejected this demand. Equally important, ever since the Center moved its headquarters to Nis airport, the Serbian government has taken ownership of the airport from the city of Nis. Only a few weeks ago, Serbia's Minister of Interior opened the construction site for a new regional center for emergency response in Vranje,¹⁷ without Russians in the deal, in an obvious attempt to reduce and neutralize the role of the Nis center and to eventually make Vranje a new headquarters.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Minister Stefanovic visited the construction of a new Regional Emergency Center in Vranje. Ministry of Interior. September 2019. Available at:

http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/portal/sr/tut/p/z1/tZnJb8IwEIX_SquKYzSOSzgz5pWCgHRLKcSXyFkILokTukMLv75GPXQTrSqEL1709I1n9B5QmAEVbMMLJnktWKnuEbXjGzewdR_hkW_3MPLuiNsd9RzDGsb4BAo0FbKRC4iadVLYNE63LS_VoYOaOs21YB2U1ct11QvJO6jNi3Wp-Bv1LFjaSn62Y0tVbU9qUp5B5JDEYjhJNJbbuWZaxNISfZ5php64ZmahOSYWROprJNaxiweGj8b-hPSRF5BhP3wgeHKDYbrh-QtMRN1WqpPwn3jV2x8VyJEVfseb-LR4_bt40w5ndOxwhkCVrw_hHXtvmNwGV0GhsEwuNC7mNcy--IVp-NNqRT2VgFri_FXC7MgITP9fE6cYyIdebbnO8hysE_Id8HPSL4L0IHIIQif2_g-jC_GTApoqsoxrKKKu5fXWjTc7D42mmwNxG-L8zcdUw7a/?1dmy&urile=wcm%3Apath%3A%2Fpublic_latin%2FPocetna%2FAktuelno%2FAktivnosti%2F30390297-4151-467d-b2a6-8205e19f0131

(CK) The two countries signed a 15-year military cooperation agreement in 2013 that includes sharing of intelligence, officer exchanges, and joint military exercises. In August 2018, Serbia took ownership of the first two of six MiG-29 fighters that Russia delivered to Serbia. While ostensibly free, Serbia is spending \$213 million to have them overhauled by Russia. Additionally, Russia plans to supply Serbia with 30 T-72 tanks, and 30 armored patrol vehicles, the first third of which arrived at Niš airport in July. Serbian Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin has stated that he also expects delivery of seven Russian helicopters (three Mi-17 and four Mi-35) by 2020. In very short, Serbian security equipment purchases are eclectic and are predominantly for interior, rather than military, purposes. This is an obvious attempt by the ruling authorities to prepare the public for a painful deal on Kosovo and in anticipation of protests and potential street violence resulting from any deal. Serbia has on several occasions already postponed acceptance of Russia's MI-35 helicopters fully aware of the fact that it can trigger the U.S. sanctions under the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Some informed commentators told CEAS that they see recent announcements of purchase of China military equipment as an attempt to diversify and balance away from Russia. But, as long as the Kosovo issue is not resolved, it would be hard to properly analyze Serbian foreign, security, and defense policies. All three¹⁸ of them are now partially influenced by Belgrade's diplomatic reliance on Russia and China in the UN SC until a deal is reached over Kosovo. New versions of Serbia's national security and national defense strategies have been endorsed by the government and are a case in point. CEAS has thoroughly analyzed them and compared them to their predecessors and Serbia's broader legal framework¹⁹ (also available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications>).

(CK) The so-called Russian–Serbian Humanitarian Center at Niš—widely believed to be a Russian spy base—is only 58 miles from NATO's KFOR mission based in Pristina. Russia has relied on cultural ties to Serbia to further increase its role in the nation, positioning itself as the defender of orthodoxy and investing funds in refurbishing orthodox churches. Additionally, Russia has helped to establish more than 100 pro-Russian nongovernmental organizations and media outlets in Serbia.

As the first organization that produced a list of these Russian outlets, CEAS has now concluded that most of them have failed to achieve any significant influence. Most of them do not operate any more, an important fact that foreign commentators either do not know or neglect to mention²⁰. In fulfilling its own interests in Serbia Kremlin is now again pursuing old, more conventional methods of operations, from infiltration in security and political structures to diplomacy and actions in international organizations. Still, Serbian public support for the EU integration is around or above 50%, and the same Serbian administration still tries to anchor Serbia stronger with the West.

¹⁸ What a Difference a Year Makes - Comparative reading and analysis of the April 2018 and August 2019 draft versions of the National Security and Defense Strategies. CEAS Report. September 2019. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/what-a-difference-a-year-makes>

¹⁹ Kosovo First - Analysis of the draft of the Defense Strategy of the Republic of Serbia. CEAS analysis. December 2018. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/7685-kosovo-first-analysis-of-the-draft-of-the-defense-strategy-of-the-republic-of-serbia>

Kosovo First - Analysis of the context of the adoption process and analysis of the draft National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/7447-kosovo-first>

²⁰ Ibid

Sputnik still has a local branch in Serbia, and has expanded its operations recently in terms of staff and space. It is among the main outlets spreading fake narratives about alleged cancer epidemic in Serbia caused allegedly by the usage of depleted uranium ammunition during the 1999 NATO bombing. It is frequently reprinted in all other Serbian media. This is an excellent example of how Russia continues to leverage and exploit the 1999 NATO bombing by continually reminding average Serbians of these events in order to drive a wedge between Serbia and the United States.

But, in order to get a better picture about current media scene in Serbia, a widely debated topic among local and international actors, one must evaluate reporting of BBC, DW and RFE, local services and a level of bias in Western donors supported non-profit media outlets. Three mentioned services in last two years act more as an opposition to president Vucic and Serbian government than information outlets.

(CK) Serbia and Russia have signed a strategic partnership agreement focused on economic issues. Russia's inward investment is focused on the transport and energy sectors. Except for those in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Serbia is the only country in Europe that has a free trade deal with Russia.

This agreement is legacy of the Milosevic regime and applies mostly for goods that Serbia produces in very limited amounts. Russia represents only 6.2% of Serbian exports and 7% of Serbian imports. Roughly 65% of Serbia's trade is conducted with the EU.

(CK) In January, Serbia and Russia signed 26 agreements relating to energy, railway construction, and strategic education cooperation.

Indeed, but as a shift towards wider and superficial cooperation in many fields, where cooperation is not in question, instead of a deepening one. President Putin's visit was in many aspects a showcase for Serbian population and for Putin. Majority of new agreements²¹ are announcements of the good intentions, memorandums of understanding or are in a very early phase of implementation. The older existing ones, in the other hand, are sometimes stagnating in implementation.

(CK) In a January 2019 state visit to Serbia, Vladimir Putin stated a desire for a free trade agreement between Serbia and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union to be signed by the end of the year.

It will be signed soon. Serbia side argues that EU candidates can in theory keep their third parties free trade agreements until the moment of the accession, but this is not a good argument. The decision of the Serbian government to sign this agreement is strange, bearing in mind that Serbia already has free trade agreements with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, while its economic engagement with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan is virtually non-existent. Serbia will, therefore, not see much, if any, economic benefit from signing a trade deal with the EEU. It is possible that this is simply another example of Russian blackmail tied to Kosovo.

²¹ These are all agreements that we sign with Russia during Putin's visit, and two are related to Cosmos and nuclear research. Blic. January 2019. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/otkrivamo-ovo-su-svi-sporazumi-koje-potpisujemo-sa-rusijom-tokom-posete-putina-a-dva/bcgfzsz>

(CK) Additionally, Russia has held out the possibility of \$1.4 billion in infrastructure aid to Serbia, aimed at building the Turk Stream pipeline and increasing Russia's energy leverage in the region. Russia has continued to oppose Kosovo's recognition as an independent sovereign country, and has condemned Kosovo's creation of its own Army. Despite its close ties with Russia, Serbia also maintains contacts with the West, for instance, trading far more with Germany and Italy than with Russia.

Serbia does much more than maintain contacts with the West. SERBIA IS AN EU CANDIDATE COUNTRY IN THE PROCESS OF MEMBERSHIP NEGOTIATION. Since 2008, it has a contractual relationship with the EU in the form of the Stabilization and Association Agreement. Serbia has the highest form of cooperation with NATO for countries outside of the alliance. It has the biggest number of troops in multinational missions and operations of all countries in the region—and is ranked 7th overall in Europe—and has recently being praised by the new NATO SACEUR as a reliable partner.²² It is about to adopt the second round of two years long circle of the Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO.

(CK) Serbia also regularly conducts more military exercises without Russia than with Russia. Like Russia, Serbia is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program, and Serbia has been part of the U.S. National Guard's State Partnership Program, partnering with the State of Ohio since 2006. The U.S. should be realistic and approach Serbia as it is, a country playing its relations with China, Russia, and the West off one another.

Simply not true. Russia has no IPAP with NATO as Serbia does. Serbia's cooperation with National Guard of Ohio has been expanded to the civilian field as well, thus implying better cooperation in emergency response and crisis management, which will further reduce the role of the Nis Center. Serbia does not play three parties against each other, as authors suggest, but merely balances its efforts to stay on the EU integration path under very rough circumstances with its needs for fanatical resources and political support to make it possible. It is true that Serbia has willingly accepted China investments in infrastructure but the unfortunate reality is that the West's willingness and capabilities to make much-needed infrastructure investments in the region is low and slow.²³ Again, Serbian foreign and security orientation is partially influenced by the Kosovo issue, and can only be assessed after Kosovo is resolved.

(CK) That does not mean that the U.S. should stop seeking meaningful engagement. Rather, the U.S. should recognize that Serbia is unlikely to join Western structures anytime soon, and that holding out hope for a massive change in the nation's trajectory is naïve.

A massive change in the nation's trajectory has already occurred and has been happening since 2000. Serbia has fulfilled almost all its obligations towards the International Criminal Tribunal by extraditing or ensuring the surrender all those indicted for war crimes. What Western commentators usually fail to mention is, in their plea for patience with Kosovo, is that all relevant political actors and influential NGOs have not supported the adoption of the necessary

²² NATO Commander Meets with Serb Leaders. VOA. July 2019. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/europe/nato-commander-meets-serb-leaders>

²³ RASHOMON - Analysis of the bilateral relations between Serbia and China and their impact on the continuation of Serbia's democratization, EU integration and cooperation with NATO and the Member States. CEAS Report. August 2019. Available at: <https://www.ceas-serbia.org/en/ceas-publications/rashomon>

legislation needed for establishing the special chambers tasked to prosecute crimes committed by Kosovo Liberation Army. Almost no one has been held accountable for crimes against Serbs and other non-Albanians 20 years after the war. Serbia respects territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Only a few days ago a member of the Bosnia-Herzegovina 1/3 presidency, while in a state visit to Belgrade, Zeljko Komsic,²⁴ expressed his acknowledgment of this fact. In the last few years, Serbia has in a structural manner increased the scope of its close cooperation with three NATO member-states of the Eastern flank - Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. Serbian president Vucic attended recently a V4 Summit. Serbia's bilateral relations with all four V4 member-states are strengthening. Despite current events in the Middle East, the fact that Serbia and NATO member Turkey maintain very good relations is a stabilizing factor for everyone in the region.

On a top of all that, last two years have been unique by the new narrative adopted by the ruling establishment in Belgrade about the need for re-establishment of strong partnership and trust with the U.S. Several excellent PR campaigns have been conducted by the USA embassy in Belgrade.

(CK) Nothing Is Easy in the Balkans

As Ambassador Grinnell rolls up his sleeves and dives into the Gordian knot that is the Balkans region, he should remember and be guided by these five principles:

1. Understand that nothing is easy in the Balkans and be mindful of America's past commitment to the region. Both Belgrade and Pristina will push simplistic and seemingly easy proposals as a way to normalize relations. It should never be forgotten that nothing in the Balkans is easy or straightforward. The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers have served in the Balkans, and the U.S. has spent billions of dollars in aid there—all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community.

2. Be a Special Envoy, not a cartographer. Due to the disposition of minority groups between the two countries, some suggest that a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia could speed up the normalization process. Swapping land and redrawing borders based on ethnic and sectarian lines would mark a dangerous precedent and would open up a Pandora's Box in the region. Supporting an initiative allowing Serbia and Kosovo to swap thousands of acres of land is not worth the instability it could cause throughout the rest of Europe. The U.S. should make it clear that it does not support any land swap.

3. Work with Europe, not against it. The U.S. should work with its European allies to encourage Kosovo and Serbia to normalize relations. Stability in the Balkans is a major policy area of alignment Washington shares with Brussels. The U.S. needs to stay engaged in the Balkans, remain committed to the region's security, and work with European allies, particularly the U.K. and Germany, to advance a transatlantic security agenda. This includes supporting the region's transatlantic aspirations and continued U.S. involvement in KFOR.

²⁴ Komsic: Vucic demonstrated non-involvement in the relations in Bosnia. Danas. October 2019. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/politika/komsic-vucic-je-demonstrirao-neuplitanje-u-odnose-u-bih/>

4. Be patient with Kosovo's progress. It is a poor country and suffers from high unemployment and corruption. The U.S. needs to develop a strategy that: (1) understands the improvements in good governance and economic growth will be a process and not an event; (2) focuses on Kosovo's long-term transatlantic aspirations, such as NATO membership; and (3) engages the nation's youth in building a robust civil society and a prosperous, dynamic economy.

5. Keep eyes wide open when dealing with Serbia. Some Serbian politicians talk a good game about wanting to join the transatlantic community, while continuing to court the Kremlin. U.S. policymakers should not forget or ignore that Serbia continues to serve as Russia's foothold in the region. U.S. policymakers should be conscious of the fact that Serbia is not only no guarantor of stability in the Balkans but still a source of instability. This is especially true in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Belgrade's support for separatism in the Republika Srpska. That does not mean the U.S. should stop seeking meaningful engagement with Serbia, but that any engagement should be pragmatic and undertaken with a realistic view of Serbia.

Conclusion

The appointment of Ambassador Grenell as Special Envoy denotes the Administration's intent to stay actively engaged in negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. Ambassador Grenell must encourage the nations of the Western Balkans to put aside historical, cultural, or religious complaints and work constructively to increase trade relations, settle border disputes, and forego inflammatory rhetoric for the sake of stability. These five principles should help guide the Special Envoys to work in a critical region of Europe.

My Conclusion:

Nothing is ever easy with reality and facts as well capability and determination to spot and assess relevant trends. Colleagues who report about the Western Balkans are well advised to check their facts and to spend more time conducting research before writing and issuing reports. There is an unfortunate trend of repeating outdated narratives and analyzing Serbia through the lens of the nineties while evaluating all other actors through rose-colored lenses. So yes, keep your eyes (and minds) open when dealing with Serbia indeed! And do not keep them closed in front of long list of examples of Kosovo's bad policy decisions, lack of reforms and downright setbacks which have nothing to do with socio-economies conditions, Serbian policies or number of years of Kosovo's independence.

This is not in the interests of the United States or the region as a whole. Rather than foster positive change, this approach simply consolidates the status quo. It conveys to average Serbs and the elected officials who must court their votes that a closer U.S-Serbian relationship is not possible, and that they should not waste any time or effort pursuing such a goal. The only beneficiaries of this are Russia and China. Rather than discourage leaders in Belgrade from attempting to bring Serbia closer to the United States, and conveying to Serbian society that such efforts are unlikely to succeed, American, and European, stakeholders should seek ways to incentivize in both Belgrade and Washington the gradual development of a genuine partnership between the two countries as it is in best interest of all in the West and the region.

The appointment of Mr. Matthew Palmer as the State Departments' envoy for the Western Balkans and Amb. Richard Grenell as a Special Envoy for Serbia-Kosovo is continuation of the Trump administration's stronger engagement in the region, which has already resulted in several successes. It is not in long-term interests of the United States to miss the opportunity to anchor Serbia firmly to the political West. For that, Serbia and the region need an updated approach by the United States to resolving the outstanding disputes, one that fits the current realities and not those of the nineties. Its approach should not be biased by a "victimhood privilege" derived from the past. Rather, the United States must have an impartial approach to all actors in the region in order to solve these outstanding disputes, permanently stabilize the Balkans, and consolidate its own positive influence in this part of Europe. Despite the outcome of the latest early election in Kosovo, this administration should give the time, space and support to presidents Vucic and Thaci, as well as other actors who are prepared to make compromise, in order to come up with a tailor-made, multidimensional, and comprehensive agreement, a compromise that can have democratic support for needed constitutional changes in both Belgrade and Pristina.

I kindly invite you to read now again the summary and the key take-ways from the report "Five Principles for U.S. Special Envoy to Guide the Peace Talks Between Kosovo and Serbia" by Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis.

Belgrade, 13 October, 2019

PS. I really hope that forthcoming CEAS flagship annual event- BELGRADE NATO WEEK- seventh in the row- will serve as an impartial platform to assess to what extend Serbia is already a genuine partner of the West, and identify where additional efforts need to be made by both sides, Serbia and the West, to strengthen the partnership.

About Jelena Milic

Director, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies

Jelena Milic is among the most influential political analysts in Serbia and the Western Balkans region.

In December 2016 she was elected as one of the POLITICO 28 Most influential People in the annual POLITICO 28 list of people shaking and shaping the world, together with the mayor of London Sadiq Khan, the CEO of Ryanair Michael O'Leary, the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security Federica Mogherini, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and founder and president of the Open Society Foundation George Soros.

In mid-2018 CEAS became one of the 22 leading international organizations, and the only one from the Western Balkans, which are partners of the Atlantic Council (AC USA) on the new strategic project DisinfoPortal. Ms Milic is enlisted as one of the experts on the Disinfo portal.

The key areas of her expertise and interest are: Transatlantic relations; US foreign politics; NATO affairs; EU affairs, NATO, policies of the EU and its member states towards South East Europe and Russia; Serbian foreign and security policies with a special focus on relations with NATO; Russian influence in the Western Balkans and Europe; Transitional justice and security sector reform; Contemporary social-liberalism; Democratic deficit of multiculturalism.

She is the leading researcher and author of CEAS [reports](#), among which are most prominent: [“Basic Instinct: The Case for More NATO in The Western Balkans”](#) published in September 2017 and [“Eyes Wide Shut – Strengthening of the Russian Soft Power in Serbia – goals, instruments and effects”](#) published in May 2016.

Her essays have been published in the bestselling book *“Don’t leave me”* by leading Serbian cultural sociologist Ratko Božović; *The Serbia-Kosovo agreement and the reform of National security* issued in the conference *“Western Balkans - The futures of integration”* published by the NATO Defense College Foundation in cooperation with the Italian Presidency of Council of the European Union and the Balkan Trust for Democracy in 2014; *“The Elephant in the Room” - Incomplete Security Sector Reform in Serbia and its Consequences for Serbian Domestic and Foreign Policies*, issued in *Unfinished Business: The Western Balkans and the International Community*, published by the Center for Transatlantic Relations Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University' in Washington DC in 2012; *The European Union and Serbia* issued in *European standards in Serbia - collection of papers*, published by the Center for Democracy in 2009; *Serbia: Between the walls* issued in 1989-2009- 2029 / 20 Years ago, 20 Years ahead – Young Liberal Ideas published by Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom in 2009.

Milic served as the assistant to Goran Svilanović, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of SCG and Serbia, during his mandate in the Stability Pact for South East Europe Department for Democracy and Human Rights. Previously she worked as a political analyst and researcher for the International Crisis Group and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia. In the late 1990s, Milic actively supported the work of the non-violent OTPOR movement, which significantly contributed to the fall of Slobodan Milosević's regime. She was the regional producer of the film about OTPOR, *Dictator Detection*, which is part of the series [A FORCE MORE POWERFUL](#), Produced by Steve York, Dalton Delan and Jack DuVall. She translated all films of the series into BHS languages.

She is an alum of the Friedrich-Naumann- Stiftung International Academy for Leadership (IAF) and had internship with prestigious Paris based think-tank CERI of the Science Po University sponsored by the European Commission.

Milic has a degree in Engineering Security Management from Union Nikola Tesla University in Belgrade. She is currently finishing her master's thesis on NATO's Crisis management system and emergency planning policies and structures.

