

The Hypnotist

**Aleksandar Vucic, John Bolton
and the return of the past**



**ESI Report
25 April 2019**

Executive Summary

It is remarkable how little change there has been in the key personnel in Serbian politics since the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. It is not surprising, therefore, that the old nationalist idea of redrawing borders on the basis of ethnicity has continued to be so prominent. What *is* surprising is the recent success that Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic has had in repackaging this old idea as progressive, non-conventional, out-of-the-box thinking. Why not, the siren song goes (again), adjust some borders along ethnic lines, as long as the process is negotiated peacefully and leads to reconciliation?

When presenting the case for new borders Aleksandar Vucic talks a lot about the need to be realistic. He wants Serbia to be “smart” and to “take whatever it can.” He insists “on peace and stability, on negotiations and a solution, because we should not leave the problem to our children and grandchildren.” But what are the problems that Vucic proposes not to leave to the next generation? In February 2018 Serbia’s minister of defence, Aleksandar Vulin explained that his country’s priority was “to stop ‘Greater Albania’ after a century of expansion.” Serbia needed “a permanent and firm demarcation between Serbs and Albanians on the territory of Kosovo.” In August 2018 president Vucic described Kosovo as a powder-keg in which both sides were just waiting to attack at any moment: “Everyone will wait for an opportunity to strike the other in order to achieve an advantage on the ground.” In November 2018, Vulin explained that, in fact, Greater Albania was already emerging. In February foreign minister Dacic explained on television: “Let us be clear about one thing, people: if there is an attack on Serbs in North Kosovo, we will have to defend them militarily, not with prayers. We must be aware of that.” That same month president Vucic explained that the conflict in Kosovo “was no longer a frozen conflict ... Big armed clashes might erupt at any moment.” This sharp rise in tensions coincides with rising fear among minorities across the region, and growing concern among Serbia’s Balkan neighbours. After two decades of peace Europe is sleepwalking into another Balkan crisis.

So what needs to be done? The European Union should immediately close the Pandora box of further talks on redrawing Balkan borders. It should reaffirm the principles that led the EU to open accession talks with Serbia in 2014, which included the gradual normalization of relations with Kosovo. It should warn Aleksandar Vucic that the war-mongering by Serbian government ministers has to stop. Threats to intervene militarily in North Kosovo are unacceptable. Germany, France and other EU members should make clear that they are also prepared to take more responsibility for security in the Balkans, if at any moment the US president decides to withdraw all US troops.

At the same time the European Union should offer Serbia, Kosovo and all other Balkan countries the prospect of real, tangible progress. As full membership remains unlikely for any accession country before 2025, a concrete, ambitious and meaningful goal could be set for all Western Balkan countries: to meet the required standards to become full members of the EU’s common market by 2025. In parallel countries should gradually be included in EU regional and cohesion policies. The EU should also support the region moving towards a Western Balkan Schengen area by 2030, with the concrete goal that by then all Balkan borders should become invisible. This, and minority rights, rather than changing borders to get rid of minorities, should transform borders in the region.

In addition, to remain credible in Pristina, European countries should take two long overdue steps: to lift the visa requirement for Kosovo citizens, as the European Commission and the European Parliament have recommended; and to support Kosovo in applying and joining the Council of Europe, with protection of minorities in Kosovo a key requirement of post-accession monitoring.

The EU also needs to send a strong signal to countries and leaders who reach out to their neighbours and minorities and resolve difficult issues in a true spirit of reconciliation. The strongest signal would be to begin accession talks with North Macedonia without delay in summer 2019.

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Border changers

“They now tell us stories about multiethnic Kosovo? Our people do not need fairy tales about multiethnic societies.”¹ (Then Serbian interior minister **Ivica Dacic** – June 2011)

“I have been talking about the partition [of Kosovo] for the past ten, fifteen years and I think that it is the only possible and quick solution.”² (Foreign minister **Ivica Dacic** – May 2018)

“We are fighting to get what we can for our people and for our state ... if we would get even one meter back, it would be a gain, as now we have nothing.”³ (Serbian president **Aleksandar Vucic** – June 2018)

“Further partitioning Kosovo is the right thing to do, at least for the areas with a Serb majority that border Southern Serbia. It would reflect both the ethnic and political reality on the ground.”⁴ Then former US ambassador to the UN **John Bolton** – March 2008)

“If the two parties can work it out between themselves and reach an agreement, we don’t exclude territorial adjustments.”⁵ (US National Security Advisor **John Bolton** – August 2018)

“My idea is a correction of the border and the unification of [*Serbian municipalities with Albanian majorities*] Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac [*with Kosovo*]. No part belonging to Kosovo, Gazivode [*lake*], North Kosovo and Trepca will be part of Serbia, that is out of the question.”⁶ (Kosovo president **Hashim Thaci** – September 2018)

“Anyone who rejects discussing the issue of borders is immature ... In Pristina they have to conduct strategic talks. An opportunity like this will not come again in the next 30 years. Albanians have to discuss this like real men.”⁷ (Albanian prime minister **Edi Rama** – September 2018)

“If we want a stabile Balkans then [*borders*] have to be redrawn in a way to bring together areas with dominant nations ... As long as there is a problem of borders and stolen territories permanent peace is not secure.”⁸ (Bosnian Serb politician **Milorad Dodik**, April 2019)

¹ Radio Television Vojvodina, [“Dacic: Kosovo podeliti sa Albanijom”](#), 1 June 2011.

² Blic, [“Dacic: Podela Kosova jedino moguće i brzo rešenje”](#), 28 May 2018.

³ Radio Free Europe, [“Vucic: Na Kosovu nemamo ništa, i jedan metar bio bi dobitak”](#), 30 June 2018.

⁴ Voice of America, [“Bolton: Podela Kosova bila bi pravica”](#), 28 March 2008.

⁵ U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, [“National Security Advisor, Ambassador John Bolton’s Press Conference at Ukrainian Crisis Media Center \(UCMC\)”](#), 24 August 2018.

⁶ KoSSev, [“Koha: Thaci will return Rankovic’s ‘gift’ to Serbia”](#), 22 September 2018.

⁷ Novosti, [“Rama priziva raspoređivanje Srbije: Ako Tramp kaze, delimo Kosovo”](#), 16 September 2018.

⁸ Vijesti, [“Dodik: Da nema stranaca BiH ne bi trajala ni dva dana”](#), 15 April 2019.

Holding the line

“Any final agreement must be fully consistent with the constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, which provides that ‘the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Kosovo is intact, inalienable, indivisible and protected by all means provided in this Constitution and the law.’”⁹ (Platform for Dialogue with Serbia adopted by the **Parliament of Kosovo** – March 2019)

“There should be no changes of borders.”¹⁰ (Macedonian prime minister **Zoran Zaev** – January 2019)

“Any talk about shifting or changing borders, exchanging territory and redrawing borders along ethnic lines is harmful for the Western Balkans and also, as the recent past has shown, dangerous.”¹¹ (Prime minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina **Denis Zvizdic** – August 2018)

“The territorial integrity of the Western Balkan states has been established and is inviolable. One must repeat this again and again because there are always efforts to talk about borders one more time. We cannot do that.”¹² (German Chancellor **Angela Merkel** – August 2018)

“Nothing in the Brussels agreement [*on the normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, concluded in 2013*] talks about border adjustments, changes to the border lines or territorial swaps. I will state for Germany that we do not think these ideas which have been floating around will contribute to finding a solution. We believe these efforts are actually risky for the region and will destabilize the whole region.”¹³ (German Ambassador to UN **Christoph Heusgen** – February 2019)

⁹ Parliament of Republic of Kosovo, “Platform for Dialogue on a final, comprehensive and legally binding agreement on normalization of relations between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia”, March 2019.

¹⁰ N1, “[Macedonia wants positive solution for Kosovo, Zaev tells N1](#)”, 30 January 2019.

¹¹ Nezavisne novine, “[Zvizdic: Prica o promjeni granica opasna](#)”, 30 August 2018.

¹² Bundeskanzlerin, “[Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates von Bosnien und Herzegowina, Denis Zvizdic](#)”, 13 August 2018.

¹³ Mission of the Federal Republic of Germany to the United Nations, “[Statement by Ambassador Cristoph Heusgen at the Security Council open debate on UNMIK/Kosovo](#)”, 7 February 2019.

Demarcation and the men of the 90s

It remains the most destructive vision in modern Balkan politics: redrawing the borders of multiethnic states along ethnic lines. It begins with writers imagining cohesive communities and ends with guns drawn, tanks firing and houses burning. Leaders propose to disentangle, painlessly, mixed populations. Tears, blood and despair follow.

In 1994 a Serb opposition politician gave an interview in Belgrade, explaining how Serbs and Albanians could live, peacefully, side by side in Kosovo. Albanians, he suggested:

“... should be given a chance to establish and start whatever they want. Be it a university, schools, hospitals and their Academy of Science. Any cultural, educational, health, social institution. Let them build whatever they want or use whatever they already have. And let them finance it on their own. That is the real solution for Kosovo.”¹⁴

This politician criticised Serbia’s then president, Slobodan Milosevic, for being too inflexible. Milosevic, he explained, “is really a great historic personality, there is no doubt about that”, but he had made many mistakes. He should have reached out to nationalists elsewhere, for instance in Slovenia, getting them to cooperate with Serbia. He should allow Albanians in Kosovo to go their own way, within limits set by Serbia. Milosevic had tried to keep control of too much land. He “has not understood in a proper way what the Serbian interest is.”¹⁵

The politician who was interviewed in this May 1994 edition of “Greater Serbia”, the journal of the Serb Radical Party, was Radical party leader Vojislav Seselj. He had long been famous for propagating border changes inside former Yugoslavia. As early as 1984, when he was a young assistant at Sarajevo University, he proposed to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina peacefully between Serbia and Croatia, based on ethnicity:

“A new territorial demarcation is necessary between Serbia and Croatia ... In this way the Serb-Croat question would finally be resolved, based on principles of humanism and democracy.”¹⁶

In May 1984 Seselj was arrested, and then sentenced by the Communist authorities to eight years in jail for posing a “counterrevolutionary threat to the social order.”¹⁷ He was released in March 1986. In 1991 he created the Serb Radical Party in Belgrade. When war broke out that year in Croatia and one year later in Bosnia and Herzegovina, bringing mass murder, mass expulsions and genocide, it became obvious that the price to pay for a “new territorial demarcation” was monstrous. For Seselj, it was a price worth paying. In the early 1990s he worked on realizing his vision of Greater Serbia by instigating ethnic cleansing and supporting ruthless paramilitary groups. After the war the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia indicted him on “eight counts of crimes against humanity and six counts of violations of the laws or customs of war”.¹⁸ In April 2018 he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for war crimes linked to the expulsion of non-Serb minorities.¹⁹

¹⁴ Serb Radical Party, [“Velika Srbija: Broj 17”](#), May 1994.

¹⁵ Serb Radical Party, [“Velika Srbija: Broj 17”](#), May 1994.

¹⁶ Helsinski odbor za ljudska prava, [“Biblioteka svedocanstava br. 34, Proces Vojislavu Seselju: Raskrinkavanje projekta Velika Srbija”](#), 2009.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ IRMCT, [“Seselj, Vojislav \(MICT-16-99\)”](#).

¹⁹ As he had been in jail in The Hague during his trial his sentence had already been served by then. IRMCT, [“Seselj, Vojislav \(MICT-16-99\)”](#). “The Appeals Chamber found that the Trial Chamber erred in not holding Šešelj criminally responsible for a speech he gave in Hrtkovci, Vojvodina (Serbia) on 6 May 1992, calling for the expulsion of the non-Serbian population ... The Appeals Chamber also determined

In 1994, the year Seselj gave the interview to “Greater Serbia”, a young man aged 24 became secretary general of his party. His name was Aleksandar Vucic. In March 1998, Vucic became Serbian minister of information when the Radicals formed a coalition with the parties of Slobodan Milosevic and of Milosevic’s wife. He was 28. He remained a minister throughout the Kosovo war, until crowds in Belgrade toppled Milosevic in October 2000. Vucic then continued as a member of parliament for Seselj’s Radicals for eight more years.

After the fall of Milosevic, the Radicals continued to win votes but did not return to power. In December 2003, they became the strongest party in Serbia, winning 82 of 250 seats. However, no other party wanted to form a coalition with them, so they remained in opposition. In January 2007 the Radicals won 81 of 250 seats. Again, no other party was prepared to govern with them. Seselj’s deputy as leader of the party, Tomislav Nikolic, failed to win the presidential election in both June 2004 and February 2008. Aleksandar Vucic failed to become mayor of Belgrade in 2004 and in 2008. Frustration led to reflection on what had to change.

Following the Kosovo war all of Serbia’s neighbours seemed to be making progress on the path of joining the EU or NATO, embracing this as the most credible vision for a prosperous future. In October 2005 Croatia began EU accession talks. In January 2007 Serbia’s neighbours, Romania and Bulgaria, joined the EU as members. In December 2008 Montenegro applied for EU membership, followed by Albania in April 2009. That same month both Croatia and Albania joined NATO. Serbia was falling behind its neighbours. And so in September 2008, Tomislav Nikolic, Aleksandar Vucic and other members of the Radical Party decided to change strategy. They voted for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU that they had earlier opposed. They then set up the Serb Progressive Party (Progressives).²⁰

In May 2012 the Progressives became the strongest party in Serbia, winning 24 percent of the vote.²¹ Vucic became party leader and formed a coalition with Ivica Dacic, the former spokesperson of Milosevic’s Socialist Party and now its leader. Twelve years after the fall of Milosevic, Aleksandar Vucic returned to government as minister of defence and first deputy prime minister. In March 2014 Vucic led the Progressives to a remarkable victory, winning 48 percent of the votes.²² He now became prime minister. In April 2016 the Progressives achieved another victory in early parliamentary elections.²³ On 2 April 2017 Aleksandar Vucic was elected president of Serbia with an absolute majority of 55 percent of votes cast in the first round. None of his predecessors had achieved this since Milosevic’s election in 1992. Looking back, this has been an astonishing political career. Nothing has stopped Vucic’s rise: not the three years of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), nor Serbia’s defeat in the Kosovo war in 1999. Not the fall of Milosevic in October 2000, nor the later indictment and sentencing of Seselj for war crimes.

It is also remarkable how little change there has been in the key personnel in Serbian party politics. In 2019 three parties, led by three men already in politics in 1999 dominate the Serbian parliament. Vucic and Dacic govern. Seselj is again the leader of the opposition.

that the crimes committed in Hrtkovci, Vojvodina, were part of the wider attack in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

²⁰ N1, “[Dokumentarni film – ‘SNS: Početak – 2008.’](#)”, 26 November 2018.

²¹ The Progressives Party led a pre-election coalition with 11 other parties.

²² The Progressives Party led a pre-election coalition with 5 other parties.

²³ The Progressives Party led a pre-election coalition with 8 other parties.

Men of the 1990s and the parties dominating the Serbian parliament in 2019



Aleksandar Vucic, Progressives – Ivica Dacic, Socialists – Vojislav Seselj, Radicals

It is not at all surprising, therefore, that the oldest vision of Serb nationalists, Seselj’s proposal to redraw borders to bring more Serbs into one state and to separate ethnic groups from one another, has continued to reemerge, again and again, from the graveyard of terrible ideas. What *is* surprising is the recent success Aleksandar Vucic has had in repackaging these proposals as progressive, non-conventional, out-of-the-box thinking. Why not, the siren song goes (again), adjust *some* borders along ethnic lines, as long as the process is negotiated peacefully and leads to reconciliation?

This argument has been made in Serbia for decades.²⁴ In 2007 the International Crisis Group noted that “partition has been Serbia’s official, albeit not publicly articulated policy towards Kosovo since 1999.” In March 2011 Boris Tadic, then the president of Serbia, explained in Brussels that “it is clear that in the future Albanians will not accept to be governed by Serbs, just as Serbs, in particular in the North, will not want to accept to be governed by Albanians.”²⁵ Most recently, in June 2018, a think tank in Belgrade, the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), repackaged this idea as a “proposal to correct the administrative line between Serbia and Kosovo, which would go more or less along the present four municipalities in the north of Kosovo (Northern Mitrovica, Zvecan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic) inhabited mainly by the Serbian population, as motivation for reaching a comprehensive agreement on the normalization of relations.”²⁶

CEAS stated that “it is obvious that a series of negotiations under the auspices of the West, which aimed to achieve Kosovo’s independence within its current borders, did not yield any result.”²⁷ CEAS did not propose recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, only the signing of “a comprehensive agreement on the normalization of relations,” which “should follow immediately after the correction” of the border. It assumed that the majority of Kosovo Serbs, who live in South Kosovo and would not join Serbia would not be affected negatively.

On 9 September 2018 Aleksandar Vucic gave a big speech to Kosovo Serbs in Mitrovica. He told them that the time had come to be realistic. He then repeated the criticism that Seselj had made of Milosevic in 1994: that Milosevic had pursued the right cause but had done so without “calculating” Serbia’s actual strength. “And then we had more than three wars. Not because of

²⁴ Dobrica Cosic, a writer (and later president) wrote already in 1981 that because of demographic changes “Kosovo will be an Albanian land in one or two decades. It must be divided with Albanians.” Kurir, [“Cosic: Jos 1981. sam bio za podelu Kosova”](#), 5 April 2013.

²⁵ Nezavisne novine, [“Tadic: Albanci nece Srbiju, Srbi nece Kosovo”](#), 27 March 2011.

²⁶ CEAS, [“West Side Story”](#), 13 June 2018.

²⁷ Ibid.

our fault but also not exclusively because of that of others. Officially and unofficially we helped our people and brothers. Serbs were dying for Knin, for Sarajevo, for Pristina.”²⁸ These wars resulted in Serbs being displaced from Croatia, Sarajevo and Pristina, Vucic explained. And why did this happen?

“All this happened not because Croats, Muslims or Albanians were stronger or more courageous than us, but because we did not understand the position of Serbia in the world. We did not realize that we are not alone in the world and that without the world we cannot succeed. Because we underestimated others and were unable to calculate ... We were not even remotely linked to reality.”²⁹

Vucic told his audience that “Milosevic was a great Serbian leader, his intentions were, in any case, for the best, but the results were very bad. Not because he or someone else wanted this, but because his wishes were not realistic ... and so we paid the highest and hardest price.”³⁰

Dark realism – the return

In March 2017 Serbian prime minister and presidential candidate Aleksandar Vucic told a Western paper that “There’s an idiom in Serbian – only donkeys don’t change. It’s very normal to change your views.”³¹ On 23 June 2017 at his glamorous inauguration ceremony newly elected president Vucic told his audience: “Our generation is ready for taking a step forward. This will take us from unhappiness to happiness. We want a future and we want it today. We seek peace with ourselves and peace with others.”³² In February 2018 president Vucic wrote an article for a European audience setting out his hopes for a European Balkans. Again he stressed that he had learned from his past: “As a young man at the time, I did not see what could be gained from collaborating across the divide. But I know now that my country paid a high price for nationalist excesses.” It was time to put the era of nationalist excess behind us: “Now that most Western Balkan countries are united in our ambition to become part of the European Union ... we have a unique window of opportunity in which to act.”

President Aleksandar Vucic is the most powerful politician in Serbia today. So when he and Kosovo president Hashim Thaci announced on 25 August 2018 in the Alpine village of Alpbach that they were considering border changes as part of an agreement on normalization of relations some observer became hopeful that the most burning open issue in the Balkans might be about to be resolved. Vucic seemed to offer the chance of a lifetime: a former nationalists, open to reconciliation with Kosovo and with Serbia’s other neighbours, strong enough to be able to take his country forward to join the European mainstream. And so, some argued, to encourage Vucic and in the interest of regional peace, European leaders should give up their resistance to new ethnically-defined borders in the Balkans. As a former US official wrote in the New York Times in September 2018:

“A breakthrough may now be in the making. It is a morally offensive one, but nonetheless the United States and the European Union should get behind it. President Aleksandar Vucic of Serbia and President Hashim Thaci of Kosovo are apparently working on a proposal to

²⁸ RTS, [“Govor predsednika Aleksandra Vucica u Kosovskoj Mitrovici”](#), 9 September 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Guardian, [“‘Only donkeys don’t change’: Serbian PM says he is ready to be president”](#), 31 March 2017.

³² Blic, [“Zemlje regiona moraju da grade mostove preko provalija. Kolinda donela poklon za malog Vukana”](#), 23 June 2017.

engage in a land swap that could bring the simmering conflict to an end. Northern Kosovo, which is populated mainly by ethnic Serbs and borders Serbia, would be transferred to Serbia. In return, a to-be-determined chunk of Serbia's Presevo Valley, which is heavily populated by ethnic Albanians and borders Kosovo, would become part of Kosovo. This swap is effectively a peaceful form of ethnic cleansing. Still, it is the right thing to do."³³

Or, as the Financial Times put it in an editorial in October 2018:

"History has shown that tampering with borders in the Balkans is more perilous than in any other part of Europe ... The most dangerous potential consequence could be to embolden leaders and peoples elsewhere in ex-Yugoslavia — above all, Serbs in Bosnia — to try to redraw borders they dislike. Conflict resolution, however, often requires leaders to take bold and even previously taboo steps. In this case, if the presidents can reach a deal, the potential benefits — to Kosovo, Serbia and the wider region — are sufficient to merit cautious international support."³⁴

The message, which has also been embraced by some European diplomats in Brussels is that the Balkans needs realism, pragmatism and out-of-the-box thinking and that a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo would be a realist, pragmatic and progressive way to strengthen regional peace. And Aleksandar Vucic is the man to deliver it.

Vucic talks a lot about the need to be realistic. He wants Serbs "to understand that it [Kosovo] is not ours as we taught ourselves, but neither is it theirs as they try to show it" (February 2018).³⁵ He wants "a country with borders we know, which are defined. When we do not know what belongs to whom it is always a source of conflicts and disorder" (9 August 2018).³⁶ He wants Serbia to be "smart" and to "take whatever we can" (16 August 2018).³⁷ Focusing on "what is realistic" as well as "achieving as much and losing as little as possible" (8 September 2018).³⁸ He notes that "not everything in Kosovo and Metohija is Serbian and not everything in Kosovo and Metohija is Albanian" (29 January 2019).³⁹ He insists "on peace and stability, on negotiations and a solution, because we should not leave the problem to our children and grandchildren."⁴⁰

But what are the problems that Vucic proposes to solve, not to leave them to the next generation? Asked on 25 July 2018 about the need for a "demarcation with Albanians" Vucic responded with a question: "You do not want demarcation with Albanians? No problem, but then tell people to get ready to defend Vranje in 40 years."⁴¹ Vranje, a city of 83,000 people in southern Serbia, is 20 kilometres from the Kosovo border. Vucic clarified two days later that in fact "this will happen in 20 years," adding: "I know their [Albanians] intentions. Demography is not on our side. They are more motivated than us Serbs to protect what they would consider

³³ Charles A. Kupchan, The New York Times, "[An Offensive Plan for the Balkans That the U.S. Should Get Behind](#)", 13 September 2018.

³⁴ Financial Times editorial board, "[A Balkans plan that merits cautious backing](#)", 30 October 2018.

³⁵ Naslovi, "[Vucic: Moramo da shvatimo da Kosovo nije cello nase, kao sto su nas ucili](#)", 16 February 2018.

³⁶ Blic, "[Vucic: Zelimo zemlju cijje granice znamo](#)", 9 August 2018.

³⁷ RTS TV, "[Vucic o KiM: Ako bude sporazuma, imacemo vise nego danas](#)", 16 August 2019.

³⁸ Al Jazeera Balkans, "[Vucic na Kosovu: Izmedju Srba i Albanaca treba vise postovanja](#)", 8 September 2018.

³⁹ BN TV, "[Sta znaci razgranicenje Kosova – Aleksandar Vucic](#)", 28 January 2019.

⁴⁰ Naslovi, "[Vucic: Moramo da shvatimo da Kosovo nije celo nase, kao sto su nas ucili](#)", 16 February 2018.

⁴¹ Blic, "[Vucic: Necete razgranicenje sa Albancima? A za 40 godina cemo braniti Vranje...](#)", 25 July 2018.

theirs.”⁴² Two days later, Serbia’s minister of interior, Nebojsa Stefanovic told the Serbian daily Kurir:

“There Albanians are carrying out a form of silent ethnic cleansing ... as it had also happened in Kosovo ... Our intelligence observed that there are [*Serbian*] citizens of Albanian ethnicity, foremost from Kosovo, buying property, land and factories in central Serbia ... they register as residents in Central Serbia ... to claim certain rights, such as voting, in particular at local elections ... The state is helping [*ethnically Serb*] citizens in that part of Serbia, in Vranje and Leskovac, not to be forced to sell their property for economic reasons and to leave, so that the demographic picture of Serbia does not change.”⁴³

On 6 February 2018 Serbia’s minister of defence, Aleksandar Vulin, long a close ally of Vucic, told the audience at a security round table in Belgrade that his country’s priority was “to stop ‘Greater Albania’ after a century of expansion.” In order to do so Serbia needed “a permanent and firm demarcation between Serbs and Albanians on the territory of Kosovo.”⁴⁴ Four months later Vulin repeated his warning. Talking to the state news agency he explained that he was not only “in favour of a demarcation between Serbia and Greater Albania” but that, if Albania and Kosovo were to unite in a Greater Albania, “Serbs could not remain divided, that would not be possible.”⁴⁵ Then, on 26 November 2018, Vulin explained that, in fact, Greater Albania was *already* emerging:

“Greater Albania is being created as an ethnically pure country. In order to achieve this Serbs have to move out, the entire Kosovo has to be carved out from Serbia, a part of Montenegro must be taken, as well as parts of Macedonia and Greece. Greater Albania is a threat for the entire region. It is worrying that the EU, NATO and the world pretend not to understand that we are witnessing the creation of Greater Albania.”⁴⁶

Serbian politicians regularly and explicitly link this question of Greater Albania to the future of another neighbour: Bosnia and Herzegovina. On 1 March 2019 Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic explained at a conference in Belgrade that Serbia should never have talked to the authorities in Kosovo:

“My personal opinion is that all problems between Serbs and Albanians from the start should have been solved in direct talks with the Republic of Albania ... I just come from a joint session of two governments – Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska [*the Bosnian Serb entity*]... I mention this because when we speak about Albania we, of course, need to speak about Kosovo, but also, I hope this is clear to everyone, when we talk about Serbia then we have to talk about Republika Srpska.”⁴⁷

Milorad Dodik, the leading Bosnian Serb politician and close ally of Aleksandar Vucic, explained on 31 January 2019 after meeting the Serbian president that the same principles applied to Bosnia. The Bosnian Serb entity had no benefits from staying inside Bosnia, Dodik

⁴² Naslovi, [“Tiha okupacija juga Srbije: 11,000 Albanaca se doselilo u Nis, srpski narode, crno nam se pise”](#), 27 July 2018; Jugmedia, [“Vucic: Bio sam optimistican, mozda cemo Vranje morati da branimo i ranije”](#), 27 July 2018.

⁴³ Kurir, [“Dramaticno upozorenje ministra Stefanovica: Albanci sprovode tiho etnicko ciscenje u Srbiji, isto su radili i na Kosmetu”](#), 29 July 2018.

⁴⁴ Kossev, [“Unutrasnji dijalog o KiM: Adresa za resenje srpsko-albanskog sukoba – Tirana, ne Pristina”](#), 6 February 2018.

⁴⁵ Kossev, [“Vulin ponovo: Razgranicenje je resenje za Kosovo”](#), 17 June 2018.

⁴⁶ Telegraf, [“KFOR krsi svoj mandat! Vulin: Dozvolili su koriscenje sile na severu Kosova i Metohije”](#), 26 November 2018.

⁴⁷ 24 Sata, [“Dačić: Srbija se s Albanijom treba dogovoriti o Kosovu”](#), 1 March 2019.

warned. Bosnia was full of “new hatreds”, “divisions were more visible than before” and the best way forward was to give up “trying to build a country where there are no cohesive elements.”⁴⁸ He recommended anticipating the “chances that the upcoming time will bring.”

On 26 February 2019 Milorad Dodik elaborated on Serbian television that something akin to Seselj’s old idea of “ethnic demarcation” should have been applied to Bosnia post-1995: “In Bosnia we have many open issues. In essence a mistake was made at the beginning. It would probably have been better if there had been no attempt to glue Bosnia back together, as it was done in Dayton. Maybe it would have been better to do a demarcation.”⁴⁹ But this was still possible, indeed desirable, Dodik noted: “I could bet on my life that 95 percent of Serbs in Republika Srpska, if they had an opportunity to go and vote, would vote in a referendum to join Serbia.” And he added:

“If circumstances are created in this way, then the Croats will also not miss the chance to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. ... well, the question is then who would remain? Of course this can happen without a war. With political will. I think it is rational.”⁵⁰

In April 2019, when asked about border changes between Kosovo and Serbia, Dodik told Serbian daily Novosti: “If we want a stabile Balkans then [*the borders*] have to be redrawn in a way to bring together areas with dominant nations ... As long as there is a problem of borders and stolen territories permanent peace is not secure.”⁵¹

In May 1993 Canadian general Louis MacKenzie, then the head of UN peacekeeping in Bosnia and Herzegovina, told the US Congress that “force has been rewarded since the first caveman picked up a club, occupied his neighbour’s cave, and ran off with his wife.”⁵² This dark realism was much in fashion in the 1990s, when Samuel Huntington wrote a bestseller about the bloody borders of civilisations.⁵³ It reflected an era, when nationalist leaders in the Balkans drew borders on napkins, armed thugs and expelled minorities, and when many regarded ethnic tensions as inevitable.

The (mainly) men in the current Serbian government, who argue like Vulin and Dacic are Serbia’s contemporary dark realists. They describe existing ethnic diversity as a threat, to which ethnic demarcation is the answer. They present peaceful migration of Serbian citizens of Albanian ethnicity as aggression, “silent ethnic cleansing” against which Serbia must be defended. They do not believe that a multiethnic federal Bosnia and Herzegovina has a future; they expect that North Macedonia will eventually split along ethnic lines; they assume that the Serb community in Kosovo is doomed; and they consider the Serbian and Albanian questions in the Balkans still open. To them a region in which most states are multiethnic is full of unfinished business.

⁴⁸ Radio Televizija Republike Srpske, “[Dodik – Vucic: Sredinom godine pocetak radova na autoputu Kuzmin-Bijeljina](#)”, 31 January 2019.

⁴⁹ Radio Televizija Srbije, “[Upitnik](#)”, 26 February 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Vijesti, “[Dodik: Da nema stranaca BiH ne bi trajala ni dva dana](#)”, 15 April 2019.

⁵² Paul R. Williams, Michael P. Scharf, *Peace with Justice? War Crimes and Accountability in the Former Yugoslavia*, 2002, p. 25.

⁵³ 1993 saw the publication of Samuel Huntington’s [Clash of Civilisations](#).

Pax Europea – the promise

On 30 July 1999, when US president Bill Clinton and the leaders of all EU governments came to Sarajevo, the Kosovo conflict, which had seen mass expulsions of almost one million Albanians from Kosovo to neighbouring states, had just come to an end. It had been the fourth Balkan war in less than a decade. The leaders gathering in Sarajevo shared a revulsion against the nationalism that had cost so many lives. They pledged “to cooperate towards preserving the multinational and multiethnic diversity of countries in the region and protecting minorities.”⁵⁴ They declared solemnly: “We will work together to promote the integration of South Eastern Europe into a continent where borders remain inviolable but no longer denote division and offer the opportunity of contact and cooperation.” Four years later, EU governments gathered in Thessaloniki to express their “unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union ... Fragmentation and divisions along ethnic lines are incompatible with the European perspective, which should act as a catalyst for addressing problems in the region.”⁵⁵

In December 2003 the EU adopted its first European Security Strategy. The document reflected its confidence: “The violence of the first half of the 20th Century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history ... Successive enlargements are making a reality of the vision of a united and peaceful continent.” It also warned: “The outbreak of conflict in the Balkans was a reminder that war has not disappeared from our continent.” The future of EU foreign policy was tied to its success in South East Europe: “geography is still important ... The importance of this is best illustrated in the Balkans ... The credibility of our foreign policy depends on the consolidation of our achievements there.”⁵⁶

A book that appeared that same year by Robert Cooper, then the director general for external and military affairs at the EU Council Secretariat, described how integration had ushered in a postmodern European peace, based on “security through transparency, and transparency through interdependence.”⁵⁷ As a result borders became less relevant and border signs were removed throughout the European Union. The politics of the balance of power, dominant for centuries, had become redundant in Europe. Italy, France, Germany and the Netherlands no longer sought to *balance each other* militarily. “Within the postmodern world there are no security threats in the traditional sense, because its members do not consider invading each other.”⁵⁸ The challenge was to go further: “Eventually,” Cooper wrote, “the lessons of this success might teach us, and others, how to spread peace more widely.”⁵⁹ As US president Woodrow Wilson put it in 1917: “there must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace.”⁶⁰

This was what the EU offered to the Balkans: inclusion in a zone of peace, in which borders would become less important, armies would no longer be needed to deter neighbours and minorities would be able to prosper anywhere. Relying on this promise hundreds of thousands of displaced returned to their former homes. Today, two decades after the Sarajevo summit in 1999, there are more than 220,000 non-Serbs living in the Bosnian Serb entity from which they had been expelled during the war; there are primary schools in four languages in North

⁵⁴ [“Sarajevo Summit Declaration”](#), 30 July 1999.

⁵⁵ Council of the EU, [“EU-Western Balkans Summit Declaration”](#), 21 June 2003.

⁵⁶ Council of the EU, [“A Secure Europe in a Better World – European Security Strategy”](#), 12 December 2003.

⁵⁷ Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century*, 2003, p. 37.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁶⁰ Woodrow Wilson, [“Peace Without Victory” speech](#), 22 January 1917.

Macedonia and Albanian is an official language in the entire country; the majority of Kosovo Serbs who lived in Kosovo before 1999 remain in their homes and Serbian is an official language in Kosovo; and Montenegro managed to obtain its independence peacefully, supported by a broad multiethnic coalition.

EU influence in South East Europe since 1999 has been based on the credibility of the promise that Balkan societies have a chance to partake in European prosperity if they embrace European values. This has kept the peace for two decades. When political actors and societies believe that certain actions and aspirations, such as changing borders or using force in politics, are both doomed to fail and illegitimate, peace can be secure even without foreign troops. Once publics and leaders believe that the use of force may work and threats, intimidation and obstruction may make it possible to change borders, all calculations change. The power of ideas about what is legitimate, explains how it was possible for 1,000 English officials to control British India in the 19th century and impossible for 600,000 French soldiers to hold on to French Algeria a few decades later.

Not everyone embraced this promise of a continental European peace through integration. The Kremlin grew suspicious of a European Union expanding its influence through norms and institutions, considering this an insidious and effective way to encroach on its own sphere of influence. In the US some Republican thinkers began to worry that the promise of peace through sharing sovereignty was a European ruse to undermine US power. One thinker, based at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, wrote a book in 2010 in which he quoted Wilson's 1917 statement that "there must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power", to condemn it as naive and dangerous, something only president Obama would believe, who "sounded like a European."⁶¹ This thinker was John Bolton. In April 2018 he became national security advisor of US president Donald Trump.

Turning point in Washington

At the end of November 2017 Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dacic met with Donald Trump's national security advisor Herbert McMaster in the US.⁶² Upon his return, Dacic told journalists that he had low expectations concerning US policy. He had an easy explanation for this. In McMaster's office he had met an American civil servant: "When I noticed that next to him [*McMaster*] is his head of cabinet, Bajraktari, who later approached me to tell me that he is from Kosovo, everything was clear to me."⁶³

A few days later, on 4 December 2017, Serbian president Vucic talked about his meetings with US State department official Hoyt Brian Yee, responsible for the Balkans. "We had many discussions and he was very open and brutal about US positions. He would tell me that we should stop imagining that changes of borders would be possible."⁶⁴ In late March 2018, Aleksandar Vucic visited the US to talk, as he put it, to "those who have created an independent Kosovo." He concluded with a tone of resignation: "I'm not satisfied with what I achieved ... I am not pleased, because the Western powers are firmly committed to respect the preservation of Kosovo's independence." The US, he complained, "does not want to talk about who Kosovo belongs to." He stressed that "Serbia wants a compromise", but the US seemed to want Serbia's

⁶¹ John R. Bolton, *How Barack Obama Is Endangering Our National Sovereignty*, 2010.

⁶² Srbija danas, "[Dacic u Beloj kuci: Sastanak sa savetnikom za nacionalnu bezbednost SAD Mckmasterom](#)", 30 November 2017.

⁶³ B92, "[Ko su braca Bajraktari, jedan 'zatekao' Dacica?](#)", 5 December 2017.

⁶⁴ Happy TV, "[Cirilica](#)", 4 December 2017.

“humiliation.”⁶⁵ Following yet another visit by a US State Department official to Belgrade on 5 April 2018 Vucic’s office issued a statement noting “differences in opinions on Kosovo.”⁶⁶ And then everything changed.

At the end of March 2018 US president Donald Trump fired his national security advisor Mc Master in a tweet.⁶⁷ On 9 April John R. Bolton assumed his position. Bolton is an intellectual who studied law at Yale, joined the Republican Party and rose to become senior vice president at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington DC. He was part of a group of hawks pushing for military action to topple the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein.⁶⁸ In 2001 Bolton joined the administration of president George W. Bush. He saw his views on Iraq become US policy, serving as under-secretary of state for arms control and international security affairs from May 2001 and as US ambassador to the United Nations from August 2005. In early 2007 he returned to the American Enterprise Institute. He also became a commentator for Fox News.

John Bolton had clear views about Kosovo for a long time. On 31 January 2008, one decade before becoming Donald Trump’s national security advisor and just a few days before Kosovo declared its independence, Bolton published an article entitled “Warning light on Kosovo.”⁶⁹ He argued that Kosovo independence might lead to tensions and “heightened tensions might require reinforcing the U.S. presence in Kosovo when we can least afford it.”⁷⁰ In February 2008 Bolton told Russia Today that he did not particularly care whether Kosovo was independent or not: “I don’t hold a brief for Kosovo’s status one way or another ... status should be resolved by negotiations.”⁷¹ Bolton added that outsiders should let Serbia and Kosovo settle their issues without interfering: “The position of the US, Russia and Europe ought to be to say that you all are going to sit in the room and work this out and we are not going to put our thumb on a scale one way or another.”⁷² Then, in March 2008, after Kosovo had declared its independence, Bolton argued openly in favour of new ethnic borders and partition:

“I think that further partitioning of Kosovo is the right thing to do, at least for areas with a Serb majority that border Southern Serbia. It would reflect both the ethnic and political reality on the ground.”⁷³

One year later, in February 2009, John Bolton warned that “this issue is still not closed.”⁷⁴

The effect of his appointment in April 2018 was quickly felt. Already in July when the US ambassador to Kosovo was asked by a journalist about “ideas going around” that an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia might involve some exchange of territories, the ambassador responded: “I’m not going to say who I think should be in the room, I’m not going to talk about the shape of the table, I’m not going to talk about what should be the elements of the final agreement.”⁷⁵

⁶⁵ B92, [“Vucic ‘dissatisfied with results’ of NYC meetings on Kosovo”](#), 22 March 2018.

⁶⁶ Novosti, [“Teske reci na sastanku Palmera i Vucica: Amerika steze obruc”](#), 5 April 2018.

⁶⁷ Twitter, [“Donald J. Trump”](#), 22 March 2018.

⁶⁸ Information Clearing House, [“PNAC letters sent to President Bill Clinton”](#), 26 January 1998.

⁶⁹ John Bolton, Lawrence Eagleburger, and Peter W. Rodman, in Brookings, [“Warning Light on Kosovo”](#), 31 January 2008.

⁷⁰ Brookings, [“Warning Light on Kosovo”](#), 31 January 2008.

⁷¹ RT, [“John Bolton: Kosovo will spark islamic extremism in Europe”](#), 5 February 2008.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Voice of America, [“Bolton: Podela Kosova bila bi pravicna”](#), 28 March 2008.

⁷⁴ Voice of America, [“Bolton: Pitanje Kosova jos nije završeno”](#), 27 February 2009.

⁷⁵ U.S. Embassy in Kosovo, [“Ambassador Delawie’s Interview for Rubikon”](#), 19 July 2018.

On 27 July Ivica Dacic went to the US to see Bolton. He came out of the meeting ecstatically: “They are willing to listen to Serbia’s arguments. Two years ago, they would say in talks that the issue has been resolved. Now they say that a compromise should be found. This is a huge difference ... Now for the first time they are prepared to hear creative solutions to possible problems, including Kosovo.”⁷⁶ Dacic’s foreign ministry issued a statement full of optimism:

“This was an extremely significant visit with good outcomes for Serbia ... According to U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton, they considered that the past U.S. policy towards the region was ‘autopilot-guided’ – the policy defined 20-30 years ago. The current U.S. Administration is ready to at least take into account on an equal footing our proposals for the resolution of major problems in the region – a lasting solution to the Kosovo and Metohija problem certainly being one of those ... This is a huge change compared to only two years ago since in all talks with the representatives of U.S. institutions it was maintained that the Kosovo issue had already been resolved.”⁷⁷

Dacic reported also meeting President Trump’s son in law, Jared Kushner, who told him that “Serbs are fierce and good guys.”⁷⁸

On 24 August 2018 John Bolton spoke out about Kosovo at a press conference in Kiev.” He stressed that previous efforts to resolve the conflict [*by the EU*] had gone nowhere: “A lot of people have tried to mediate. Those efforts have failed.” The result was tensions. Bolton added: “US policy is that if the two parties can work it out between themselves and reach agreement, *we don’t exclude territorial adjustments*. It’s really not for us to say.”⁷⁹ On 28 August 2018 Ivica Dacic celebrated the new US position: “This is a historic turn, a historic success. We succeeded to change the position of the West that earlier did not even want to talk about this.”⁸⁰

Dacic had many reasons to be confident. John Bolton’s views on multiethnicity and on Europe, Trump’s attitude towards NATO in the Balkans and the generally erratic US policy looked set to transform the strategic landscape in the Balkans. Kosovo was not the first multiethnic country for which Bolton concluded that the best way forward was partition and changing borders. In April 2015 Bolton argued for a three-state solution for Israel-Palestine, annexing bits of Palestinian land to neighbouring states, Egypt and Jordan.⁸¹ In November 2015 Bolton concluded that “Iraq and Syria as we have known them are gone”, arguing in favour of carving them up: “Rather than striving to recreate the post-World War I map, Washington should recognize the new geopolitics.”⁸² Reinforcing doubts about the US commitment to existing borders, there is a new White House policy when it comes to the territorial integrity of nations. In March 2019 Trump signed a proclamation in which the US recognized Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights, occupied Syrian territory. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained that the decision to recognize the Golan Heights as Israeli was “simply recognizing facts on the ground and the reality.” It also challenged a basic principle of the post-World War II international system: the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war.

⁷⁶ N1, [“Serbian FM Dacic satisfied with talks in Washington”](#), 27 July 2018.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia, [“Dacic: ‘A highly significant visit to the U.S. with good outcomes for Serbia’”](#), 27 July 2018.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, [“National Security Advisor, Ambassador John Bolton’s Press Conference at Ukrainian Crisis Media Center \(UCMC\)”](#), 24 August 2018.

⁸⁰ RTV, [“Dacic: Ovo je istorijski zaokret – niko nam ne nudi celo Kosovo i Metohiju”](#), 28 August 2018.

⁸¹ The Washington Times, [“Bolton: A ‘three-state solution’ for Middle East peace”](#), 16 April 2014.

⁸² The New York Times, [“John Bolton: To Defeat ISIS, Create a Sunni State”](#), 24 November 2015.

Bolton's arrival was always likely to erode the common EU-US position towards the Balkans. Bolton had never hidden his view of the EU as a nuisance at best and a threat to US sovereignty at worst. He wrote a number of essays about this topic, long before Donald Trump declared that the EU was a "foe" of the US in July 2018.⁸³ In a book published in 2007, Bolton described the EU's role in global politics with intense frustration: "This EU desire to be the middleman – the bridge – stems not from altruism but from a carefully calculated objective of increasing its influence at the expense of other blocks, and particularly at the expense of the United States." Bolton noted that the job of the US became easier when the EU was divided: "there are also certainly examples where internal EU disagreements hobble or even destroy their effectiveness. In the UN, at least, we can only hope for more of the latter."⁸⁴ The US, he wrote on one occasion, should "cut the deal we want, and marginalise the EU, thus also frustrating their global governance agenda."⁸⁵

This latter point is important: for Bolton the motivation to confront, divide and weaken the EU is not about any one particular issue. In 2010 John Bolton wrote a long essay on "How Barack Obama is Endangering our National Sovereignty" to alert the US public to the threat of "global governance to US sovereignty."⁸⁶ In Bolton's analysis the EU's very existence posed an ideological threat to US power. This is because "EU diplomats and their worldwide allies sympathetic to their transnational aspirations have been spreading the gospel" of multilateralism. The international left "emphasize the EU example."⁸⁷ In another essay from 2010 he developed the argument further. The EU "is the leading source of substantive globalist policies ... [*European elites*] are not content with transferring their own national sovereignty to Brussels, they have also decided, in effect, to transfer some of ours to worldwide institutions and norms, thus making the European Union a miniature precursor to global governance."⁸⁸

Since global governance is a threat to "American autonomy and self-government", weakening the EU becomes a US national interest. This corresponds to the outlook of a White House that celebrated Brexit and regards the EU as a competitor to be bullied. On 25 February 2019 Donald Trump issued a threat that the EU has to "play ball" in trade talks or "we're going to tariff the hell out of you".⁸⁹ On 14 March 2019 Trump repeated "that his administration could inflict "pretty severe" economic pain on the EU if it did not engage in trade talks with Washington."⁹⁰ As Guardian commentator Natalie Nougayrède observed in February 2019, Trump recently increased his attacks:

"The Trump administration not only dislikes the European Union, it is out to destroy it. The trip by the US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, to Europe last week was episode three of the onslaught, designed to play on east-west divisions within the EU. Episode one was Donald Trump's 2017 Warsaw speech, infused with nativist nationalism. Episode two was Trump's 2018 moves on tariffs, and his tearing up of key agreements such as the Iran

⁸³ BBC, "[Donald Trump: European Union is a foe on trade](#)", 15 July 2018.

⁸⁴ John Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and abroad*, 2007; The Atlantic, "[How John Bolton views U.S. Allies and Adversaries](#)", 24 March 2018.

⁸⁵ John R. Bolton, *Surrender is not an option*, *Ibid.*, p. 466.

⁸⁶ John R. Bolton, *How Barack Obama Is Endangering Our National Sovereignty*, 2010.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 8 and 6.

⁸⁸ The Guardian, Natalie Nougayrède, "[Why Trump and his team want to wipe out the EU](#)", 18 February 2019; Chicago Journal of International Relations, John R. Bolton, "[Should We Take Global Governance Seriously](#)", 1 September 2000.

⁸⁹ Politico Europe, "[Trump to EU: Play ball or 'we're going to tariff the hell out of you'](#)", 25 February 2019.

⁹⁰ Financial Times, "[Trump warns EU of 'severe' economic pain if no progress on trade talks](#)", 14 March 2019.

nuclear deal and the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. To which should be added his open encouragements to Brexiteers, and his decision to pull out of Syria.”⁹¹

Is episode four of US-EU divergences on foreign policy going to be played out in the Balkans? It would not be a surprise.

The story of US deployment to Syria illustrates the unpredictability of US commitments. On 14 December 2018, following a call with Turkish president Erdogan, Trump announced the withdrawal of the US from Syria, to the surprise of his cabinet; a decision that prompted the resignation of his Defense Secretary.⁹² Six days later Trump announced his intention to withdraw half of the US troops from Afghanistan, a decision that stunned Afghan officials, who said they had not been briefed.⁹³ Little prevents the US president to wake up one day and to announce via a tweet the withdrawal of all remaining US soldiers from Kosovo. Currently KFOR has around 3,500 soldiers from 28 nations. Already this only includes 659 US soldiers, fewer than the number of Austrian and Slovenian soldiers combined.

*Keeping the peace: KFOR troops in Kosovo (February 2019)*⁹⁴

Country	Size
United States	659
Italy	542
Austria	430
Hungary	385
Turkey	246
Slovenia	242
Poland	240
Switzerland	190
Greece	111
Germany	100
Romania	57
Moldova	41
Armenia	41
Ukraine	40
Denmark	35
Croatia	34
Albania	29
UK	23
Others	92
Total	3,525

The future of KFOR is not the only insecurity related to US policy. There is also the White House’s view on NATO. In an interview in July 2018 Trump called into question Nato’s founding principle:

⁹¹ The Guardian, Natalie Nougayrede, [“Why Trump and his team want to wipe out the EU”](#), 18 February 2019.

⁹² AP News, [“Trump call with Turkish leader led to US pullout from Syria”](#), 21 December 2018.

⁹³ The New York Times, [“U.S. to Withdraw About 7,000 Troops From Afghanistan, Officials Say”](#), 20 December 2018.

⁹⁴ NATO, [“Kosovo Force \(KFOR\): Key Facts and Figures”](#), February 2019.

“FOX: Membership in NATO obligates the members to defend any other member who has been attacked. So let’s say Montenegro, which joined last year, is attacked: Why should my son go to Montenegro to defend it from attack? Why is that?”

TRUMP: I understand what you’re saying. I’ve asked the same question. Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people.

FOX: Yeah, I’m not against it — or Albania.

TRUMP: No, by the way, they have very strong people – they have very aggressive people. They may get aggressive, and congratulations, you’re in World War III. Now I understand that – but that’s the way it was set up. Don’t forget, I just got here a little more than a year and a half ago.”⁹⁵

Against this background the recent diplomatic escalation between the Kosovo parliamentary majority and the US administration was striking. When the government in Pristina imposed tariffs on Serbian imports in response to Serbia’s campaign to block Kosovo’s accession to international institutions and Serbia’s intensifying campaign for the derecognition of Kosovo’s independence by other states, the US government insisted that these tariffs be lifted unconditionally.⁹⁶ When the Kosovo government refused, the tone got harsh quickly. In January 2019 the US refused to issue a visa for Kosovo prime minister Ramush Haradinaj.⁹⁷ In February 2019 a visit by the US National Guard Commander to Kosovo was cancelled.⁹⁸ In February 2019 the US Embassy in Pristina confirmed that the Marshall Centre, a security and defence studies institute linked to the US Defence Department, cancelled its invitations for Kosovo participants.⁹⁹ On 12 February 2019, a remarkable letter signed by three senior US officials warned the Kosovo government: “it is incredible that after all we’ve done together, Kosovo values our friendship so lightly as to ignore our advice.”¹⁰⁰

The US, Europe and the view from Belgrade

In the past decade the US has been a guarantor of Balkan stability, acting in close cooperation with its European allies. Its policy was predictable – on “auto-pilot”, as John Bolton allegedly told Dacic disapprovingly. This is not longer the case. As an analyst in Foreign Affairs wrote in January 2019, a new phase in Trump’s foreign policy had begun: the phase of unilateral action:

“To facilitate this shift, Trump needed a new team that would empower him, not stand in his way. This was the story of 2018 ... The appointment of Bolton was particularly crucial to Trump’s foreign policy autonomy ... This unified foreign policy is one in which the Trump administration has no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. It takes a

⁹⁵ Vox, [“Trump somehow still doesn’t understand NATO”](#), 18 July 2018.

⁹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Serbia, [“Kraljevina Lesoto povukla priznanje Kosova”](#), 16 October 2018; [“Komonvelt Dominika povukla priznanje Kosova”](#), 2 November 2018; [“Grenada povukla priznanje Kosova”](#), 4 November 2018; RTS, [“Unija Komora povukla priznanje Kosova”](#), 7 November 2018; Blic, [“Vucic: Pobedili smo. Srbija ostaje glavni snabdevac strujom \(VIDEO\)”](#), 10 November 2018; Telegraf, [“Preko Kurca su hteli da udju u Interpol. Preko koga su hteli, tako su i prosli! Daciceva poruka Pristini: Dozivali ste debakl”](#), 20 November 2018; N1, [“Pristina introduces 100 percent tariffs for Bosnian products”](#), 21 November 2018.

⁹⁷ Pristina Insight, [“US rejects visa for Kosovo PM, media reports”](#), 15 January 2019.

⁹⁸ Radio Free Europe, [“U.S. Cancels National Guard Commander's Kosovo Visit Over Serbia Tariff”](#), 11 February 2019.

⁹⁹ N1, [“Marshal Centre excludes Kosovo from its programmes due to import tariffs”](#), 22 February 2019.

¹⁰⁰ N1, [“US officials criticize Pristina for ignoring advice on tariffs”](#), 12 February 2019.

transactional approach with all nations, places little value on historical ties, and seeks immediate benefits ranging from trade and procurement to diplomatic support ... This worldview is manifest in Washington's opposition to the European Union, support for authoritarian leaders who defy international norms, and withdrawal from international organizations and treaties."¹⁰¹

The widening rift between the US and some of its European allies is now engulfing Balkan policy. When announcing the radical shift in US policy on Kosovo in Kiev in August 2018, Bolton noted that he expected the EU to embrace the same position: "I don't think anybody in Europe would stand in the way if the two parties to the dispute reached a mutually satisfactory settlement."¹⁰² There had been no prior consultations between the US and its allies. Bolton treated as irrelevant the fact that only two weeks earlier Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, had declared publicly that German policy on borders in the Balkans had not changed: "The territorial integrity of the Western Balkan states has been established and is inviolable. One has to repeat this again and again because there are always efforts to talk about borders once again. We cannot do that."¹⁰³

Although Merkel and Trump spoke, US policy of pushing for a quick deal between Vucic and Thaci did not stop.¹⁰⁴ On 14 December 2018, Donald Trump sent two letters to Vucic and Thaci, welcoming their "current reconciliation efforts." Trump warned that: "Failure to capitalize on this unique opportunity would be a tragic setback, as another chance for a comprehensive peace is unlikely to occur again soon." He noted that the US "has invested heavily in the success of Kosovo as an independent, sovereign state." And he declared: "I look forward to hosting you [Thaci] and President Aleksandar Vucic at the White House to celebrate what would be an historic accord."¹⁰⁵

This lack of coordination and erosion of trust between allies was carefully noted in Belgrade. A few weeks after his return from the Munich Security Conference in February 2019, Aleksandar Vucic went on television. In a long interview he explained that the world was dominated by "four great powers: the United States, China, Russia and Europe, or better put Germany plus."¹⁰⁶ He focused on defence spending: "The US has a 750 billion military budget, China is heading towards a 400 billion military budget and Russia towards 55 or 56 billion. But through strategic armament Russia is spending its money in the smartest way ... In military terms Europe does not exist." Vucic spoke about the things he had "personally seen at the Munich Security Conference and what I think will happen in the coming period." There was, first of all, the fall-out between Germany and the US. Vucic explained how in Munich:

"[German Chancellor] Merkel came out with a very, very strong speech, where she positioned Europe partly against Russia, partly against China and partly against the US ... she emphasized the differences to the US most strongly ... Merkel received standing ovations that I have never seen before in a closed space, the applause lasted 10 to 12 minutes. Europeans stood up. It was a big personal victory for her, as there were 500 Americans in Munich."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ Foreign Affairs, "[Trump's Foreign Policy Is No Longer Unpredictable](#)", 18 January 2019.

¹⁰² U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, "[National Security Advisor, Ambassador John Bolton's Press Conference at Ukrainian Crisis Media Center \(UCMC\)](#)", 24 August 2018.

¹⁰³ Bundeskanzlerin, "[Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates von Bosnien und Herzegowina, Denis Zvizdic](#)", 13 August 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Die Bundesregierung, "[Bundeskanzlerin Merkel telefoniert mit dem amerikanischen Präsidenten Donald Trump](#)", 27 August 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Hashim Thaci, "[Donald Trump's Letter](#)", 14 December 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Happy TV, "[Cirilica](#)", 26 March 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Vucic then explained: “We need to look at all this when we talk about the position of Serbia. The US is increasingly relying on Poland, Greece and on the Baltic states. It tries to build its position in Europe based on Poland and Greece ... Of course Italy is becoming an ever more important ally of the Trump administration. This explains why for Germany and France the Netherlands are becoming their third partner, instead of Italy ... the Americans will oppose any idea of a European army. Germans and French know that without a European army the Europeans cannot become a big power.” Vucic stressed that in a situation of “increasing fragmentation in global relations ... everyone will be thinking more and more about their own power.” Countries have to rely on themselves, as alliances are fraying:

“Look at Orban and the speed with which he is arming Hungary. Look at the speed with which Romania is arming itself ... Look at Bulgaria which is buying F-16 [fighter jets]. Everyone is arming themselves.”¹⁰⁸

In this new era, Vucic suggested, Nato membership meant little. Referring to the statement by US president Trump in July 2018 about Nato and Montenegro, Vucic underlined that Trump had sent a message about US commitment: “This is why I think it is important for us to take care of ourselves and to strengthen our military.” The picture Vucic presented is of a world where old certainties are no longer hold. Germany and the US no longer pull in the same direction. NATO membership means little. National power depends on strong militaries. This is far from the post-modern vision of European peace. And yet, Vucic underlined, in this new world “Serbia has positioned itself well and is in the best position.”¹⁰⁹

Aleksandar Vucic, supreme commander

On 10 November 2018 the Serbian ministry of defense organized a military exercise in ten locations across the country. It was the biggest such event in Serbia since the 1980s.¹¹⁰ It involved 8,000 soldiers, deploying, as the ministry proudly noted, a total of 669 tanks, armoured vehicles, fighter jets, helicopters, ships and other heavy equipment.¹¹¹ It also provided an occasion for president Aleksandar Vucic, who refers to himself as Serbia’s supreme commander [*vrhovni komandant*], to address his generals and the public.¹¹² On a cold November day, in a field south-east of Belgrade, Vucic spoke about his joy:

“When you compare what we had in 2013 and today, five years later, these are simply not the same militaries. Investments in the military will continue to increase even further. By the end of 2019, it will be possible to see huge progress, as most of the assets, weapons and tools are expected in the beginning and middle of next year.”¹¹³

On television Vucic explained the significance of this display of force: “Let me remind you: when I became minister of defence [*in July 2012*] we had only one MIG 29 aircraft that did not function, and MIG 21 [*planes*] that were called coffins because of their outdated technology ... today eight MIG 29 planes were in the air, and we have ten in total.” Vucic noted that 100 tanks had taken part in the exercise and that, when it came to the number of tanks “we are a super-power.” Serbia was strengthening its air force, “especially our anti-aircraft equipment.” During 2019 Serbia will get “from our Chinese friends our first unmanned combat aircrafts [*drones*] ...

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ RTS, “[Vucic: Vojska Srbije napreduje koracima od sedam milja](#)”, 10 November 2018.

¹¹¹ “The exercise involves about 8,000 members of the Army and Air Force and Air Defence, 645 combat systems and assets and 24 aircraft.” See Ministry of Defence of Republic of Serbia, “[“Century of Victors 1918-2018” military exercise](#)”, 10 November 2018,

¹¹² Danas, “[Vucic nije ‘vrhovni komandant oruzanih snaga’](#)”, 30 September 2017.

¹¹³ RTS, “[Vucic: Vojska ce biti sve snaznija i opremljenija](#)”, 10 November 2018.

because this is the future of war.” Serbia also expected to receive more armored vehicles and 30 more tanks from Russia. Vucic announced that thirteen tanks would drive through Serbia so that citizens could admire “our new weapons.”¹¹⁴ Then Vucic spoke about Serbia’s neighbours:

“We and the Hungarians are quite close (when it comes to military strength). All others are far, far behind ... no other country in the former Yugoslavia is as strong as we are. And we will continue to strengthen our military dramatically.”¹¹⁵

In fact, Vucic is putting his taxpayers’ money where his mouth is: according to the annual report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Serbia spent 161 million dollars more on defence in 2017 than all other five Western Balkan states together. The official budgets of the Serbian ministry of defense show a sharp increase in annual spending by 38 percent (305 million euros) between 2013 and 2019.¹¹⁶ Defence minister Aleksandar Vulin told daily Blic in December 2018 that president Vucic “understood how necessary it is to invest in an army that was deliberately devastated, *according to a plan* [emphasis added], from 2000 until 2012.”¹¹⁷ Radio Free Europe reported that no other area of policy saw as big an increase in spending in 2019 as defence.¹¹⁸

*Comparative military expenditure in the Balkans, SIPRI (in USD, millions)*¹¹⁹

Country	2017
Serbia	731
WB5	570
Bosnia	165
Albania	162
North Macedonia	112
Montenegro	74
Kosovo	57

A naïve observer might respond to this with an obvious question: Why? Serbia is a candidate country negotiating to join the EU. It is surrounded by NATO members Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Albania and soon North Macedonia. Who does its military seek to impress?

An examination of recent statements by president Vucic and his ministers suggests answers. These are not reassuring. On 10 August 2018 Marko Djuric, the head of the Serbian government’s office for Kosovo, called an urgent press conference in Belgrade. With an ethnic map of Kosovo behind him, Djuric spoke about the military importance of Serbia’s borders: “The bigger part of Kopaonik [*the mountain range between Kosovo and Serbia*], the southern part, almost until Pancic peak [*the highest peak of Kopaonik with 2,017 meters*] is today on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija.” Djuric told his audience that “180 meters from Pancic peak

¹¹⁴ RTS, “[Vucic: Vojska Srbije napreduje koracima od sedam milja](#)”, 10 November 2018.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Budget of the Ministry of Defence of Serbia (in Euros): 2013 – 500 million, 2014 – 511 million, 2015 – 497 million, 2016 – 493 million, 2017 – 582 million, 2018 – 597 million and 2019 – 805 million. See Ministry of Defence of Republic of Serbia, “[Budzet](#)”, March 2019; Ministry of Finance of Republic of Serbia, “[Zakon o budzetu Republike Srbije za 2019. godinu](#)”, December 2018.

¹¹⁷ Blic, “[Vulin: Najveci deo vojnog budzeta za obnovu i nabavku sistema i povecanje plata](#)”, 9 December 2018.

¹¹⁸ Radio Slobodna Evropa, “[Vise novca za naoruzanje Vojske Srbije](#)”, 11 December 2018.

¹¹⁹ SIPRI, “[Military expenditure by country](#)”, 2018. The SIPRI definition of military expenditure “includes all spending on current military forces and activities” including “retirement pensions of military personnel.” SIPRI, “[Frequently Asked Questions](#)”, 2018.

there are daily KFOR patrols.” He warned that if Kosovo would be universally recognized as an independent state, these KFOR patrols would be replaced by Albanian special forces. He pointed out that “from Pancic peak one can see almost half of Serbia. For us this is of strategic importance.”¹²⁰

Such warnings are not about the distant future. Six days after Djuric’s presentation president Vucic offered a glimpse into his own thinking, describing Kosovo as a powder-keg in which *both* sides were just waiting to attack at any moment:

“Everyone will wait for an opportunity to strike the other in order to achieve an advantage on the ground. And every day we will worry if they will attack us in the north, where they will strike us, with whose support, whether they will get American support as during Oluja, or support from anyone else.”¹²¹

Any reference to operation Oluja [*storm*], a massive military offensive carried out by the Croatian army in summer 1995, which displaced hundreds of thousands of Croatian Serbs and restored Croatian control over most of its territory, is certain to create panic among Kosovo Serbs. On 2 October 2018 Serbian foreign minister Ivica Dacic explained that without a deal on demarcation *inside* Kosovo there was always a risk of an “armed attack on North Kosovo,” the threat of a “Blitzkrieg”. Dacic warned that Serbia needed to get prepared: “In that case Serbia will have only two options: to engage in a conflict or to let it happen as we did in the case of Knin [*the capital of the Croatian Serb statelet recaptured by Croatian forces in 1995*].”¹²² In February 2019 Dacic explained on Pink television: “Let us be clear about one thing, people: if there is an attack on Serbs in North Kosovo, we will have to defend them militarily, not with prayers. We must be aware of that.”¹²³ On 13 March 2019 Dacic repeated his warning: “Serbia will not allow an attack on the Serbs in the North. Of course, Serbia will not allow attacks anywhere in Kosovo, but they [*the Kosovo government*] are obsessed with the North.”¹²⁴ Two days later he stated at a press conference:

“Let me repeat something that was clearly communicated to all international representatives. In case KFOR does not guarantee security, which it is obliged to do according to UN resolution 1244, in case there is an armed attack on Serbs, Serbia will defend them.”¹²⁵

Serbian politicians admit that it might not be easy to recognize this looming Albanian invasion when it arrives. In December 2018 Miroslav Lazanski, a parliamentarian from Vucic’s party, explained in an interview that “there is the option that they [*Albanians*] peacefully enter the North [*of Kosovo*] with their military, without arresting Serbs or using violence. What are we going to do then?”¹²⁶ On 3 March 2019 Milovan Drecun, chairperson of the Committee for Kosovo in the Serbian parliament and also a member of Vucic’s party, explained:

“Pristina is obsessed with establishing full control over the North of the province [*of Kosovo*], which cannot be done without the complete expulsion of the Serb population. They have plans, they are waiting for the right moment ... They want to put under their control Trepca [*a big mining company in Mitrovica*], Gazivode [*the most important source*]

¹²⁰ Kurir TV, “[Marko Djuric se obraca javnosti povodom aktuelne situacije na Kosovu](#)”, 10 August 2018.

¹²¹ RTS TV, “[Vucic o KiM: Ako bude sporazuma, imacemo vise nego danas](#)”, 16 August 2019.

¹²² Novosti, “[Ivica Dacic: Ne moramo o razgranicenju, ali o priznanju sigurno necemo](#)”, 2 October 2018.

¹²³ Pink TV, “[Ako Albanci napadnu sever Kosova mi moramo da posaljemo vojsku-Dacic o optuzbama da je izdajnik](#)”, 22 February 2019.

¹²⁴ Telegraf, “[Sever Kosova je ‘opsesija’ Albanaca! Dacic otkrio: Upozorili smo KFOR i NATO da cemo intervenisati u slucaju napada na Srbe na KiM](#)”, 13 March 2019.

¹²⁵ Tanjug, “[Dacic: Ako dodje do napada na Srbe na KiM a KFOR ne reaguje, Srbija hoce](#)”, 15 March 2019.

¹²⁶ TV Studio B, “[Lazanski: Pristina bez sankcija](#)”, 8 December 2018.

of water in Kosovo], to unite North and South Mitrovica, to reach the administrative border [between Kosovo and Serbia] and to make that the border of their imaginary state.”

Drecun warned that Pristina had at its disposal armed forces that “can put the security of Serbs in danger”: the “so-called Kosovo Security Forces”, “organised criminal groups under the control of leading politicians such as Thaci and Haradinaj”, and an Albanian brigade of “300 members of the Islamic State.” Drecun worried that the latter had been brought back to Kosovo as “part of a plan to solve the Kosovo issue in the way Edi Rama [*the prime minister of Albania*] wants, by finally uniting Kosovo and Albania and putting the Albanian flag on Pancic peak where the administrative border between Kosovo and Serbia is now.”¹²⁷ On 21 March 2019, Drecun told Pink television that the feared Greater Albanian invasion was in fact imminent:

“We were sent a message that the Albanian military might help special forces in Pristina to finalise the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, to expel all Serbs, at least those in North Kosovo. This is a dangerous message, that can take us and the entire region to war ... this is a message that we should expect the army of the Republic of Albania on the peak of Kopaonik.”¹²⁸

Such messages are conveyed by Serbian ministers and parliamentarians over and over again: armed conflict is close, and if any provocation occurs, Serbia will defend Kosovo Serbs by sending forces into North Kosovo. The message is reinforced by media close to the government, and by headlines in tabloids close to Vucic, such as these typical front pages of the daily *Informer* in December 2018:

3 December 2018:

“Terrible threats from Pristina:

War in Kosovo starts on 15 December?!

Kadri Veseli announced that the Kosovo army will be formed on 14 December and that the day after it will be sent ‘to put northern Kosovo under control’”

Vucic: Everything leads to total conflict.”¹²⁹

7 December 2018:

“A plan from hell revealed

Siptars (Albanians) are attacking the North on 31 December?!

They want to catch Serbs unprepared and during New Year celebrations take over the North to present Belgrade already on 1 January with a *fait accompli*.

Haradinaj provoking: Serbs cannot even step into Kosovo, Americans are defending us.”¹³⁰



¹²⁷ Pink TV, “[Novo jutro](#)”, 3 March 2019.

¹²⁸ Pink TV, “[Novo jutro](#)”, 21 March 2019.

¹²⁹ *Informer*, “[RAT NA KOSOVOU KREĆE 15. DECEMBRA: Strasne pretnje iz Pristine, Siptari odredili DATUM NAPADA NA SRBE?!](#)”, 4 December 2018.

¹³⁰ *Informer*, “[SIPTARI NAPADAJU SEVER KOSOVA 31. DECEMBRA?! Provaljen pakleni plan Pristine!](#)”, 8 December 2018.

On 21 February 2019 president Vucic told Serbian Prva television that the conflict in Kosovo “was no longer a frozen conflict”: “Albanians want to finish and consolidate the formation of their state which they created in 2008. Albanians are nervous ... we will not allow any attack on our people, and we will not allow their expulsion.” Vucic stressed that big armed clashes might erupt at any moment: “It is completely obvious that *a single incident* leads us to clashes. Will we avoid that? I hope so ... We are fighting for peace until someone physically attacks us and begins to kill Serbs. Which is something I would never exclude, taking into account the irresponsibility and craziness of some of the political leaders in Pristina.”¹³¹ On 2 March 2019 Vucic told public broadcaster RTS that he saw signs of “a much wider action against Serbia”: “They want to weaken the Serb defence of North Kosovo ... they are waiting for the right moment to attack Serbs in North Kosovo.”¹³² On 3 March 2019, defence minister Vulin issued an official statement, warning that,

“[*Kosovo prime minister*] Haradinaj, a terrorist who was never punished for his crimes and who wants to repeat his crimes, knows that Vucic is not afraid of him, just as he knows that any attempt by him to enter North Kosovo militarily would result in a debacle ... Haradinaj is doing everything to provoke a conflict that he would then blame on Serbia.”

Vulin then declared that “citizens of Serbia can rest assured: the army of Serbia is certainly ready to implement any order given by the supreme commander to protect peace and stability.”¹³³

The Hypnotist

“We must, if nothing else, at least try to solve the *Gordian knot*, and not hide and leave the most difficult burden to our children. To live means to love the land where our children walk and not just to pride ourselves with victories of our grandfathers.”¹³⁴

Aleksandar Vucic, Blic, 2017

The US and Kosovo quarrel. The EU is divided. Germany and the US distrust each other in the Balkans. The EU High Representative and her team are considered reckless by the majority of EU member states. The Kosovo parliament passes a resolution against the Kosovo president’s willingness to discuss changing borders. The Albanian prime minister quarrels with the prime minister of Kosovo about Kosovo’s future, and dismisses a respected foreign minister who warned against the dangers of redrawing borders along ethnic lines. Meanwhile in Serbia a majority of people supports a president, who restores Serbian military power to confront a looming Greater Albanian invasion. Newspapers are full of stories that arouse nationalist emotions. President Vucic is popular while his opposition is deeply divided on Kosovo.

To anyone who was expecting a diplomatic breakthrough between Belgrade and Pristina, this balance sheet after a year of intense dialogue might look like a failure. But what if the objective was instead to change the parameters of Western Balkan policy, and create more space for Serbian nationalists to pursue their traditional objectives?

¹³¹ Prva TV, [“Gostovanje predsednika Srbije Aleksandra Vucica u Justru sa Jovanom i Srdjanom”](#), 21 February 2019.

¹³² RTS, [“Vucic za RTS: Pristina ceka povoljan trenutak za napad na sever”](#), 2 March 2019.

¹³³ Blic, [“Vulin: Ako Haradinaj udje vojskom na sever Kosova, to ce se zavrstiti BEZANJEM I RASULOM”](#), 3 March 2019.

¹³⁴ Blic, [“Vucic: Zasto nam je potreban unutasnji dijalog o Kosovu”](#), 24 July 2017.

Scott Adams, author of a recent book on the persuasion skills of Donald Trump notes that master persuaders resemble hypnotists. Both need to make connections and get into the mind of others (“Now your arm is feeling heavy!”) while reassuring them (“Let yourself go, think of a beautiful garden”) before they can take their subjects into a trance. Hypnosis works on the basis of trust and is “a powerful tool when it is working in the same direction as people’s existing urges.” Adams concludes that “once you see with your own eyes the power of persuasion, and how easily people can be reprogrammed, it changes everything you do.”¹³⁵

Serbia’s president is very good at making connections. He can be charming. He is a good actor. His role: the huge man who sleeps little and therefore meets people early in the morning. A dominating presence in meetings, speaking with a voice so soft that everyone leans forward to catch his words. The strong leader able to assure guests that he understands, indeed anticipates their concerns and questions. The analyst who speaks about his people – the Serbs – as if they are a group of children he needs to steer, with their foibles and good and bad qualities, towards their own good. In 2013 he told a German paper that he was “afraid of the Serbian mentality.” In early 2019 he told a visiting delegation that when Serbs “do not have the water until their noses”, they can get restless. Vucic positions himself as a solitary pillar of reason, telling visitors that he is the only one in his government not in favour of the unification of Serbia with the Bosnian Serb entity. He presents himself as a realist, whose policies are based on evidence and who reads – indeed commissions – constant opinion polls from the best pollsters. He quotes results from the very latest focus groups and draws on the advice of the best spin doctors on the market: American, Israeli, European. Vucic understands power in all its shapes: the power of charisma, of stories, of quietly delivered threats, of surprise and timing, the power of raising expectations and shifting blame.

In late August 2018 Aleksandar Vucic displayed his skills in the Austrian Alpine village of Alpbach, on a panel with Kosovo’s president Hashim Thaci. Vucic introduced himself as “just an ordinary man who is trying to influence, in any way that I can, ways to keep peace and tranquillity in our region.”¹³⁶ He addressed the others present as his partners in this collective enterprise:

“I was asking yesterday or today Sebastian Kurz, I was asking Jo Hahn, who is a true friend of Serbia, I was asking Angelina Eichhorst [*a senior official at the EEAS*], who is sitting here, to support not only our region, but to support this kind of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. If we are to reach a sort of compromise solution, we will be able to reach it only if we get support from the European Union.”

He explains his own ambitions: “I am doing my best to help Serbs and their future. But I also think that I am, that we are, doing something that is important for Albanians. Because this is about Serbs and Albanians. We need to live together in the future.” Then he presented himself as a victim of attacks, from Serbian nationalists and people who are prejudiced against him.

“I am under strong political fire in my country, including from most of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its archbishops. All political opponents are portraying me as the biggest traitor, because I want to give the holy land of Serbia to Albanians. At the same time, you are depicting me here and elsewhere as the true leader of Greater Serbian ideas.”

His message to European diplomats was flattering: without *your* support we cannot succeed. At the same time he warned that getting to an agreement was a matter for Serbs and Albanians:

¹³⁵ Scott Adams, *Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don’t Matter*, 2107, p. 78.

¹³⁶ European Forum Alpbach, [“New perspectives on EU enlargement”](#), 25 August 2018.

“And now when we finally started talking about substantive issue between Belgrade and Pristina, all the others are saying ‘OK, guys, what are you doing there?’ Why do you care about what are we doing? We are doing something for the future of Serbs and Albanians.”

At the same time he gave away nothing. Asked if talks about new borders mean that he was ready at the end to recognise Kosovo as an independent state, Vucic answered: “I have not mentioned that and I have not mentioned any kind of partition. I was not speaking about this because we are in the process of negotiations.”¹³⁷ And he added:

“I like Hashim because he is a better politician than I am, I don’t speak about the negotiating process. I don’t give any details because we are negotiating in good faith. I hope that he does the same. If we reach a possible arrangement we will do our best then to try to convince our people to accept it.”¹³⁸

Half a year later, in February 2019 at the Munich Security Conference, Vucic conveyed the same message to an international audience: he was committed to reach a compromise solution. However, the dialogue was “*not about the EU or the US*, it is about us and it is about our future and that is what I was saying to Mr Thaci thousands of times.”¹³⁹ Later that evening Vucic spoke to Serbian media about how much he disliked going to any EU-facilitated talks on Kosovo: “Last night maybe I made a mistake because I fought [*at a panel with Thaci*] like a lion, but this is how we fight for Serbia, every day. This is why, whenever I am invited to Brussels, I get a Pavlovian reflex [*and*] feel nauseous in my stomach.”¹⁴⁰

In the meantime Vucic’s ministers were drawing red lines to reassure the Serb public that Serbia was not going to give up anything. On 11 April 2018, in an interview for the Serbian public broadcaster, Dacic explained: “I am absolutely convinced that for President Vucic the option of recognizing the unilateral act of Kosovo’s declaration of independence does not exist ... Big powers respect the situation on the ground and that situation goes in favour of a permanent solution and compromise.”¹⁴¹ On 20 June 2018, Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabic said that personally she “believes that Serbia will never recognize an independent Kosovo, because I think this is impossible.”¹⁴²

Alpbach was a brilliant performance by Vucic. As Scott Adams writes, master persuaders move the energy of debates to the topics that help them. The persuasion trick is to focus all debate on the issue of one’s choice: “The things you think about the most, and remember best, seem more important to you than other things ... if you are using super strong persuasion, you can be wrong on the facts, and even the logic of your argument, and still win.”¹⁴³ This is why Donald Trump talks about building a “big, beautiful wall” to capture public attention in ways no reference to “better border control” would ever manage. Unless Trump gets his wall, he implies, the US will be swamped by terrorists and drugs and his opponents will be to blame. At the same time, Adams notes, “there is one kind of wall that is hard to criticize; the one that is entirely different in each person’s head.”¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ European Forum Alpbach, [“New perspectives on EU enlargement”](#), 25 August 2018.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Munich Security Conference, [“Panel Discussion – Security in South Europe: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?”](#), 16 February 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Pink TV, [“Vucic: Borio sam se kao lav za Srbiju i njene interese”](#), 17 February 2019.

¹⁴¹ RTS, [“Dacic: Pregovori o sudbini Kosova jos nisu završeni”](#), 11 April 2018.

¹⁴² Sputnik Srbija, [“Brnabiceva ponovo odgovorila na pitanje: Da li je Kosovo Srbija?”](#), 20 June 2018.

¹⁴³ Scott Adams, *Win Bigly: Persuasion in a World Where Facts Don’t Matter*, 2017, p. 23-25.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

Vucic's master stroke has been to shift the debate on normalization of relations with Kosovo as part of Serbia's EU accession process away from the commitments Serbia had taken on in 2013 and 2014 when it began accession talks. He also manages to avoid any discussion about what is actually required to improve the lives of Kosovo Serbs living in Kosovo and of Albanians living in Serbia. "You must help us" (so if we fail, it is a result of insufficient support) is linked to "You must not interfere" (or if you do, we will fail for sure). "I do not say a single bad word about Albanians" coincides with Vucic's ministers accusing Kosovo's leader of planning a war crime to ethnically cleanse Kosovo of Serbs. Vucic suggests that drawing a new, clean line on a map, a fair demarcation somewhere in Kosovo, will miraculously reduce tensions. He then warns that unless Serbia obtains this demarcation, there will be tensions, clashes, conflicts and perhaps even a new war, and this will all be the fault of those who do not have the courage to do the right thing. He also leaves completely vague what this new demarcation might look like: a Schengen border, an invisible line crossing the centre of Mitrovica? Or a place to position Serbia's new tanks, waiting for another provocation to move into the South of Kosovo?

Finally, Vucic's most striking magic trick has been to make the majority of Kosovo Serbs disappear as a serious issue in this debate on their future. On 14 August 2018 Vucic told a group of Serb soldiers: "Who from you wants to go to Djakovica [*a town in southern Kosovo*]? Who from you wants to live in Djakovica? I don't want to live there, but is there anyone of you who does? There is no one. There is no one, but then they say that this is ancient Serb land that we will protect for 5,000 more years. But there is not a single Serb who wants to live there."¹⁴⁵ In fact, there are a lot of Serbs who still live in southern Kosovo: the majority of Kosovo Serbs lives there today.. As ESI wrote in a report in 2004, challenging official data and perceptions:

"While there are no official population figures in Kosovo, both Serbian and Kosovo government data suggest that there are currently around 130,000 Serbs resident in Kosovo. The Belgrade-based Kosovo Coordination Centre (CCK), which is the Serbian administrative body responsible for Kosovo affairs, published a detailed report in January 2003 which gives a figure of 129,474 Serbs in Kosovo in 2002. This corresponds closely with ESI estimates based on primary school enrolment figures from the Kosovo Ministry for Education. There are 14,368 pupils in Serb-language primary schools in Kosovo in 2004. Using data on the age structure of Kosovo Serbs from a number of post-war surveys, this suggests a total Serb population of 128,000.

According to the last Yugoslav census, there were 194,000 Serbs resident in Kosovo in 1991. During the 1980s, the number of Kosovo Serbs had declined. It is unlikely that the number of Serbs increased again during the 1990s. In fact, during the 1990s, the Serbian government felt compelled to introduce various measures aimed at stemming the emigration of Serbs from Kosovo. The extent of Serb displacement from Kosovo is therefore likely to be around 65,000. Contrary to a widespread perception, two-thirds of the pre-war Kosovo Serb population actually remain in Kosovo."¹⁴⁶

In 2004 two thirds of the Kosovo Serb population lived in South Kosovo. According to health insurance data this has not changed.¹⁴⁷ There are about 110,000 Kosovo Serbs with insurance in Kosovo, 58 percent in the South. This corresponds to the number of votes for Serb political parties in 2017, when 61 percent of all Serbs who voted did so in the South.

¹⁴⁵ Tanjug, "[Vucic: A, ko od vas hoce da zivi u Djakovic?](#)", 14 August 2018.

¹⁴⁶ ESI, "[The Lausanne Principle: Multiethnicity, Territory and the Future of Kosovo's Serbs](#)", 7 June 2004; "[The Anti-Lausanne Principle – How \(not\) to set the Balkans aflame again](#)", 26 August 2018; "[Alpbach appeal to Vucic, Thaci and European leaders – Adi Cerimagic](#)", 25 August 2018; Politico, "[Redrawing Balkan borders would be a fatal mistake](#)", 28 August 2018.

¹⁴⁷ Health Fund of Republic of Serbia, "[Kontakt](#)".

Table: Persons with health insurance, Serb health fund (December 2017)¹⁴⁸

Area	Numbers	Percentage
North Kosovo	46,185	42.2
South Kosovo	63,248	57.8
Total	109,433	100.0

Table: Where people who voted for Serb parties in elections live (in percent)¹⁴⁹

Area	Parliamentary elections 2017	Municipal elections 2017
North Kosovo	37.9	39.2
South Kosovo	62.1	60.8
Total	100.0	100.0

This means that any ethnic demarcation, cutting of the North of Kosovo, would clearly *not* be in the interest of a majority of Kosovo Serbs; a community that did not flee Kosovo even in 1999, when the Serbian state pulled out. Nor would it be in the interest of North Mitrovica, their most important urban centre. Every “realist” talking about partition also ought to take a short walk through North Mitrovica, crossing the Ibar river from the South and turning right, walking into the area known as the Bosnian neighbourhood (*Bosnjacka mahala*), inhabited by Bosniaks, Albanians and Serbs. Its main street is lined with shops selling furniture, tools, clothes and food. Shops have signs in Albanian or Serbian or both, prices are denoted in Dinar or Euro, and shops accept both. One hears Serbian and Albanian, shop assistants and waiters speak both. Drinking a raki or tea in the “Trepca Kayak club”, is likely to find Albanians and Serbs in a conversation with the Turkish owner.

One could also cross the Ibar river and turn to the left, passing the “Dolce Vita” café, once a hangout for local thugs called the “bridge watchers”, arriving at three high-rises known as “tri solitera,” partly inhabited by Albanians. From there the street continues along the bank of the Ibar through a mixed neighbourhood until the village of Suvi Do; from there onwards the villages belong to South Mitrovica and are inhabited by Albanians, though they are on the northern bank of the Ibar. Continuing further one reaches the Albanian village of Cabra in the majority-Serb municipality of Zubin Potok. Or one could, after crossing the bridge, walk north, up the pedestrianized King Peter Street, past the statute of Prince Lazar, and then, after another 300 metres, turn left and go up “Miners hill” to reach a monument from 1973. It symbolizes a mining chart, dedicated to Albanian and Serbian miners who lost their lives during the Second World War. Below it is the settlement of Mikronaselje, an ethnically mixed neighbourhood with Serbs and Albanians.

It is obvious that a demarcation through the centre of this town would be like an operation on an open heart. Anyone who believes that ethnic partition is an easy way forward would need to explain *how* this would work in North Mitrovica, which is today the most multiethnic urban place in Kosovo.

¹⁴⁸ Health Fund of Republic of Serbia, “[Broj osiguranika sa 31.12.2017.](#)”, 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Health Fund of Republic of Serbia, “[Broj osiguranika sa 31.12.2017.](#)”, 2019; Health Fund of Republic of Serbia, “[Kontakt](#)”; Central Election Commission of Kosovo, “[Izbori za Skupstinu Kosova 2017: Konacni rezultati iz CPR-a](#)”, 2017; “[Izbori za Skupstinu Kosova 2017: Rezultati po opstinama](#)”, 2017; Central Election Commission of Kosovo, “[Izbori za skupstinu opstine](#)”, 2017.

There is also another dark paradox. Today 486 officers of the Kosovo Police Service are in charge of security for the citizens of the four municipalities in North Kosovo. 435 of them are Kosovo Serbs, integrated in the Kosovo Police Service. While Serb politicians evoke a looming threat of mass violence. Serb police officers in North Kosovo told ESI in November 2018 that they could not recall serious inter-ethnic violences “in many years.” This is not surprising as homicide rates in Kosovo have declined sharply, from 6.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2008 to 1.6 in 2015. Kosovo’s homicide rate is now half that of Estonia.¹⁵⁰

What is worrying, however, is deadly violence linked to municipal politics in North Kosovo. On polling day in 2013 men in masks stormed three polling stations in North Mitrovica, “smashing ballot boxes, assaulting staff members, firing tear gas and eventually forcing election officials to flee.”¹⁵¹ The election process had to be repeated twice. Before it ended, one Serb candidate for mayor, critical of the Serbian government was dead: 35-year old Dimitrije Janicijevic, father of three children, was killed by automatic gunfire in front of his home in North Mitrovica in January 2014.¹⁵² The candidate backed by Vucic’s party was then elected mayor with 53 percent of the vote.¹⁵³

Another Serb politician in North Mitrovica met an equally tragic fate: Oliver Ivanovic. First, in July 2017, his car went up in flames. In an interview in September 2017 Ivanovic told journalists from Belgrade that Serbs in the North “are now afraid not of Albanians but of other Serbs.”¹⁵⁴ Then, in the morning of 16 January 2018, on the same day that Janicijevic had been murdered in 2014, Ivanovic was killed by six bullets in front of his office in North Mitrovica. As of April 2019, no one was on trial for these crimes.¹⁵⁵

What is also worrying is that even after the murder of Ivanovic, Kosovo Serbs critical of Belgrade’s policy still find themselves in the crosshair, with Serbian media inciting hatred against them. One individual accused of treason today is Rada Trajkovic, one of few remaining Kosovo Serbs openly critical of the Belgrade government. She describes herself on twitter as “a mother, doctor and fighter for a multiethnic Kosovo and Metohija.”¹⁵⁶ She is a vocal critic of Vucic’s idea of demarcation. In an interview in December 2018 she warned:

“Vucic brags about the fact that there have been ‘no dead Serbs since the Brussels agreement was signed’ [in 2013], but there have been Serbs murdered by other Serbs. We have five, now even six murders, and we know more or less how they came about. It was our mafia that did this ... the fear of Serbs today is incredible.”¹⁵⁷

Recently, on 17 April 2019, a Belgrade based-tabloid published an article on Trajkovic under the title: “Discovery: This woman became an accomplice to the Siptars [*derogatory for Albanians*].”¹⁵⁸ The paper Alo reported that Trajkovic’s aim was “to take the investigation into Oliver Ivanovic’s murder in the wrong direction and to put the blame for that crime on the state

¹⁵⁰ Index mundi, [Kosovo – Homicide rate](#) and [Homicide rate Kosovo and Estonia](#).

¹⁵¹ New York Times, [“Violence mars election in Kosovo”](#), 4 November 2013.

¹⁵² Blic, [“Ubijen odbornik Dimitrije Janicijevic u Kosovskoj Mitrovici”](#), 16 January 2014.

¹⁵³ RFE, [“Hardline Kosovo Serb Elected North Mitrovica Mayor”](#), 24 February 2014.

¹⁵⁴ Vreme, [“Strah Srba od ekstremnih Srba”](#), 28 September 2018.

¹⁵⁵ Balkan Insight, Andjela Milivojevic, [“Bombs and Bullets: Fear and Loathing in North Kosovo”](#), 16 February 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Twitter, [“Rada Trajkovic”](#).

¹⁵⁷ Vreme, [“Radoicic je Vucicev telohranitelj”](#), 6 December 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Alo, [“Ova žena je postala saucesnik Siptarima i skovala zaveru vezanu za ubistvo Olivera Ivanovica!”](#), 17 April 2019.

of Serbia and its political leaders and security agencies.”¹⁵⁹ Marko Djuric, the head of the Kosovo office in the Serbian government, further developed this theme on Facebook:

“I can only express disgust and contempt for such a person. I wonder how evil and dishonest such an individual must be ... to engage in this kind of distasteful collaboration with political structures in Pristina, which are led by identified cut-throats and criminals.”

On 2 March 2019, president Vucic used equally strong language when he attacked as traitors Serbs tempted to cooperate with Albanians, comparing them to collaborators with fascism:

“Before and after the battle of Kosovo [*in 1389*] all those who ever wanted to rule over Serbs knew that they need to divide Serbs and turn them against each other. At the time of the [fascist] Independent Croatian State there were at least two ministers who were Serbs ... The goal [of our enemies] is to find Serbs who will fight against Serbs.”¹⁶⁰

While there is today a vigorous and emotional debate on the future of the dialogue with Serbia among Kosovo politicians among Kosovo Serbs anyone who raises questions comes under attack.

Vucic often plays the good cop at international events, as when he noted at the Munich Security conference in February this year that “I am ready to always speak to them. They did not hear a single bad word about the Albanian people from myself, never, ever, because we appreciate them, we respect them, we appreciate their interests.”¹⁶¹ Back in Serbia the tone changes. When Hashim Thaci declared on 1 March that there would not, after all, be any changes of Kosovo’s borders Vucic responded on 2 March:

“Yesterday we could hear that all Albanian leaders are against the idea of demarcation. With this they want to tell us what we kind of already knew ... The same statements by Haradinaj, Thaci and many here in Belgrade ... against division and against this or that [meant that] in reality that they supported the entire Kosovo’s independence all the time.”¹⁶²

When the Kosovo parliament adopted a negotiating platform in early March 2019, declaring that “any final agreement must be fully consistent with the constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, which provides that ‘the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Kosovo is intact’” Vucic issued a statement on 8 March declaring that the platform was not the beginning but the end of all talks: “The adopted platform is in fact the decision by Pristina to terminate the dialogue with Belgrade. For some time I have been warning EU high representative Federica Mogherini and her team that the adoption of this kind of platform does not leave any space for a compromise solution.”¹⁶³ His message: there is no room for negotiations with Serbia on normalisation unless Pristina first agrees to cede territory.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ RTS, “[Vucic za RTS: Pristina cekala povoljan trenutak za napad na sever](#)”, 2 March 2019.

¹⁶¹ Munich Security Conference, “[Panel Discussion – Security in South Europe: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?](#)”, 16 February 2019.

¹⁶² RTS, “[Vucic za RTS: Pristina cekala povoljan trenutak za napad na sever](#)”, 2 March 2019.

¹⁶³ Parliament of Republic of Kosovo, “Platform for Dialogue on a final, comprehensive and legally binding agreement on normalization of relations between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia”, March 2019. 24 Sata, “[Vucic najavio odlucan i ozbiljan odgovor na platformu Pristine](#)”, 8 March 2019.

What is to be done? A 2025 perspective

What follows from all this? The experience of the sharp rise in tensions in the past year strongly suggests that the European Union should close the Pandora box of further talks on redrawing borders along ethnic lines.

At the same time the EU needs to agree on credible strategies how Serbia, Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans *can* move forward towards integration with the rest of Europe. It is a matter of war and peace that this vision remains credible. The EU must walk the region back from the brink of returning to the dark ideas of the 1990s.

Already at the upcoming Western Balkans meeting on 29 April in Berlin both Germany and France should send a strong message to the region. They should reaffirm the core principles, that led the EU to open accession talks with Serbia. In December 2013 all EU member states agreed on a joint position:

“This process shall ensure that both can continue on their respective European paths, while avoiding that either can block the other in these efforts and should gradually lead to the comprehensive normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, in the form of a legally binding agreement by the end of Serbia’s accession negotiations.”¹⁶⁴

European leaders should reaffirm that they will insist on this. There should be no more secretive talks between two men, without participation of parliaments, on issues that affect tens of thousands of people, instilling fear in minorities who have seen far too many dramatic upheavals in the 1990s already.

Germany and France should warn Aleksandar Vucic that the war-mongering by Serbian government ministers has to stop. Threats to intervene militarily in North Kosovo are unacceptable. If these do not stop, the accession process with Serbia could be suspended.

At the same time the European Union should offer Serbia, Kosovo and all other Balkan countries the prospect of real, tangible progress. It should develop a credible roadmap for the period 2020-2025, beginning with the next European Commission and the Croatian and German EU presidencies:

- As full membership remains unlikely for any accession country before 2025 a concrete goal could be set for all Western Balkan countries that meet the required standards to become full members of the EU’s common market by 2025. This would promote reforms and increase the attractiveness of the region for investors.
- In parallel to countries making measurable progress on reaching this goal, as well as making progress on the rule of law, minority rights and good neighbourly relations, they should be included in EU regional and cohesion policies.
- At the same time the EU should support the region moving towards a Western Balkans Schengen area by 2030, with the concrete goal of no further need for internal controls. Balkan borders should truly become invisible. This and minority rights, rather than changing borders to get rid of minorities, should transform the region’s borders.

¹⁶⁴ Conference on accession to the EU, [“General EU position”](#), December 2013.

To be credible in Pristina, European countries must also take two long overdue steps: to lift the visa requirement for Kosovo citizens as the European Commission and the European Parliament have recommended; and to support Kosovo in applying and then joining the Council of Europe. In the spirit of the 2013 Brussels agreement, Serbia should not campaign against this. Being inside the Council of Europe would also be good for Kosovo Serbs. Protecting the rights of all minorities should be a central issue for the Council of Europe in post-accession monitoring of Kosovo.

Germany, France and other EU members should make clear that they are prepared to take more responsibility for security in the Balkans. If at any moment the US president decides to withdraw US troops from Kosovo, Europeans should be prepared to step in and reinforce their presence. There is a need for more military confidence building measures in the region, so that the scenario of a sudden military offensive or escalation is exposed as fiction.

Finally, the EU needs to send a strong signal to those countries and leaders who refrain from destructive policies and rhetoric and reach out to their neighbours to resolve difficult issues in a true spirit of reconciliation. This is a strong reason why accession talks with North Macedonia should begin without delay in summer 2019.

Recently president Vucic predicted that Macedonia would not get any recognition for its efforts in the past two years, from resolving bilateral issues with Bulgaria to reaching a historic agreement with Greece. On 26 March 2019 Aleksandar Vucic explained on TV that Skopje will discover that the EU was not reliable:

“They will say: ‘We entered NATO and we pay more money and we will get some kind of security’. But in line with the current situation and trends [*in NATO*] it is not clear until when this security assurance will last.

And they will be told ‘You are not joining the European Union anytime soon.’ I tell you now that the EU will not allow them to open accession negotiations ... And everything these countries did will not be rewarded. People will see that it was not enough. This will further add to insecurity and instability across our region ... there will be a lot of dissatisfied people, disappointed by the unfulfilled promises of Europe.”¹⁶⁵

President Vucic’s message to the Serbian public is that nothing the EU is currently promising is likely to have any impact on their lives. There are no security guarantees. There is no European peace on the horizon. In the end only hard power matters and dark realism will shape the future of the Balkans. Serbia is getting ready for this new era.

In the interest of Serbia, Kosovo, the Balkans and Europe this era should never arrive. The promise of Balkan peace through integration must not become a casualty of Serb nationalist illusions, the Trump administration or EU complacency. It is up to European leaders to prove the dark realists wrong and to secure Balkan peace for the next decade.

¹⁶⁵ Happy TV, “[Cirilica](#)”, 26 March 2019.

Annex – Message from Alpbach – the case against partition



ESI's Adnan Cerimagic with Aleksandar Vucic and Hashim Thaci in Alpbach.

On 25 August 2018 in the Austrian village of Alpbach presidents Aleksandar Vucic and Hashim Thaci first told the public that they were close to a breakthrough in their talks on a deal between Serbia and Kosovo which would involve some unspecified ethnic border changes, ESI's Adnan Cerimagic was invited to speak at the same event and addressed the two presidents and the audience. Here is his presentation:

“I was born in 1986 in a small town in northern Bosnia-Herzegovina called Doboj. Today, Doboj is in Republika Srpska, one of the two Bosnian-Herzegovinian entities.

I was five years old when the war broke out in former Yugoslavia. I was six when fighting began in Bosnia. Together with my mother and my brother I spent the war as a refugee in Croatia. My father remained in Bosnia and fought in the war.

We were lucky because we all survived. When the war ended in 1995 I was 9. Throughout my primary and secondary school education there was peace in Bosnia. There was peace also when I went abroad to study, first in Austria and then in Belgium. There was peace also in 2013 when I returned to Bosnia to live and work there. There is also still peace in Bosnia today.

But I remember very vividly February 1996, when together with my family we went to Doboj for the first time. It was a city of horror where Bosniaks and Croats were expelled, all minarets and mosques destroyed and many houses damaged. We did not even dare to say our Muslim names out loud on the streets. For months and years after the war I had nightmares about Doboj.

But since then Bosnia has changed dramatically. The number of foreign soldiers keeping the peace went from 60,000 in 1996 to just less than a thousand today, mostly Austrian soldiers. Since 2006 there is a joint army and conscription has been

abolished. I am part of a generation of young Bosnians and Herzegovinians that were never forced to use a gun.

But today I stand before you and tell you this story because I am genuinely worried. And I will tell you why.

I do not remember the time before the war but I read a lot about how Dobož turned into a nightmare. I read a lot of Yugoslav intellectuals and politicians talking about borders, injustice and ethnic rights. They were all making a simple but destructive argument:

You are only safe IF your own ethnic group is in control.

You are only safe WHEN and WHERE your own ethnic group is in control.

This idea destroyed Yugoslavia and Dobož. It destroyed families, it has led to mass expulsions and genocide in Srebrenica. It turned borders into frontlines, created new borders drawn in human blood.

But ideas can change. And they did in Bosnia. Dobož is a good example.

Half of the pre-war non-Serb population returned to live there today: almost 20,000 of them. Mosques and minarets have been rebuilt.

The Dobož of my nightmare is today an ordinary city, where Bosniaks and Croats do not fear their Serb mayor. They even vote for him repeatedly. And they all face the same challenges: poor health and educational system, too few jobs to compete for.

And this is why I am worried. Today's Dobož was possible because the international community had a clear policy:

NO MORE CHANGES OF BORDERS ALONG ETHNIC LINES.

Serbs should be safe in Central Bosnia, as much as Croats in Banja Luka. Bosniaks in Dobož or Srebrenica. Macedonians should be safe in Tetovo, as much as Bosniaks in Novi Pazar, Albanians in Presevo, or Serbs in Gracanica and Mitrovica.

Some ideas seem innocent at first, but as they grow up they can become monstrous. The idea that you are only safe if, when and where your own ethnic group is in control is such an idea.

This is why I plead to Balkan leaders, in particular those sitting on this panel today, not to go down this road, again. I also plead to European leaders, in particular those sitting on this panel and those in the audience, to state clearly that they would oppose it if the Balkan leaders decided to take that road.

The task for our generation is to turn all Balkan borders into European borders: like those between Tyrol and South Tyrol. In order to do that we will have to do a lot: build institutions based on the rule of law, allow freedom of media and do a lot more. It is time.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ European Forum Alpbach, [“New perspectives on EU enlargement”](#), 25 August 2018.