

Transcript of the interview with Albin Kurti, Vetëvendosje's PM candidate, who won last month's early elections in Kosovo. Joanna Hanson from New Perspektiva conducted the interview.

NP: What are Vetvendosje's prime objectives regarding the outcome of the Dialogue?

AK: First week in office I will start dialogue with Serbs of Kosova. With bottom-up approach. Dialogue for development, open, democratic, social dialogue with Serbs of Kosova. First month in office, I will review the agreements which were signed throughout six years of previous dialogue, 2011 - 2017, in order to check the extent of their implementation and of their impact on real life of the citizens of Kosova. Likewise, in the first month in office, I plan to meet with Mr Borrell, Josep Borrell, the successor of Ms Mogherini, in order to have a dialogue with Brussels for dialogue with Belgrade - we have to prepare it well. And I can foresee that dialogue with Serbia may start before elections in Serbia but cannot be concluded before that. Dialogue with Serbia will be one of my top priorities but not the top priority. My two top priorities are jobs and justice; economic development with laborintensive investments and fight against organised corruption, and organised crime and high level corruption. So, I want Serbia to recognise the Republic of Kosova. Independent state of Kosova. It will be good for both Kosova and Serbia, but I am not going to beg for that. So dialogue will be at the service of helping Serbia to get normalized. So, as long as Serbia does not face its own past, I think it's not a normal country. Serbia must face its past. So, normalisation of relations between our two countries goes through normalisation of state of Serbia - it's very important. Ultimately, of course, we see that this dialogue must be concluded with Serbia changing its own Constitution, and Serbia recognizing the independent state of Kosova. And Serbia pledging to European integration and to the peace in the Balkans. We are not expecting this to happen any time soon taking into consideration the nature of the regime in Serbia.

NP: What do you think has been lacking in the approach of the Kosovo side, by the Kosovo government, over the last 8 years, since 2011?

AK: I think Kosovo's governments, throughout these years, after the declaration of independence, have been quite passive, non-assertive and, especially, they did not ask from Serbia to face its own past and to be ready to apologise for the crimes committed here 20 years ago and to pay for the war damages caused. I think it's a very unfortunate event that our governments were not at the level of the task of responsibility to ask this from Serbia. Around 10.000 unarmed and unprotected civilians were killed, over 1.000 children were there among them. Then 20.000 women raped, 120.000 houses and other objects, buildings, burnt down or destroyed, 860.000 Albanians deported in the spring 1999 outside Kosova, over a million had to flee from their homes, and 1200 cultural artefacts they've stolen from our museums, and bank deposits and pension funds they also stole - they didn't pay a single euro to us for this! And, in contrast, they just now say we want north of Kosova because we've lost Kosova. And they want to put the priority of their mourning over loss of Kosova within the Milosević mindset over sufferings of the people of Kosova caused by the state which was led by regime of Milosević.

NP: How will you implement Kosovo's legal obligation to establish an Association of Serb Majority Municipalities?

AK: Association of Serb Majority Municipalities (ASMM) is basically dead, due to resistance of people, actions of opposition, and, in particular, decision of Constitutional Court of 23rd December 2015, which said that none of the 7 chapters of ASMM is in compliance with our Constitution, and altogether 23 articles of our Constitution are basically violated by this ASMM. You can have an association of municipalities but it cannot be one-ethnic because it will go against the character of the Constitution of the independent Kosova. So, for me it was no surprise that once this decision of the Constitutional Court was published on 23rd of December 2015, no Serb of Kosova protested, only Belgrade. We have 132.000 Serbs in Kosova. One hundred thousand are grown up people, at least, and none of them protested, no single letter of protest for this decision of Constitutional Court! They didn't care much because Serbs do care, just as Albanians do, for jobs and justice. It's not this ASMM and I think that the name they chose for this is absolutely a non-starter because in

1991, 14 municipalities in Bosnia & Herzegovina created their Association which declared independence in January 1992, and in February 1992 got its own Constitution. In December 1995 in Dayton, Ohio, international recognition, named the Republika Srpska. So, it is a non-starter.

So, I think we should discuss about rights of people, needs of the communities, not about new constructions which will render us dysfunctional in a Bosnia-like model. So, in B&H you have Republika Srpska which is not a state but it is a republic within B&H which is a state but it is not a republic. In Kosova, they want to create the ASMM here as a kind of Republika Srpska *light*, which would have elements of a state but not be a republic, but inside a state of Kosova which would become less of a republic. So, I think those solutions of previous centuries are not welcomed here and they do not do well to Albanians, or Serbs, for that matter. Serbs of Kosova are under pressure of Belgrade - international observers showed this regarding elections on 6th of October 2019 - they said there was intimidation, pressure on Serbs of Kosova. There is more democracy in China than in Serb majority municipalities in Kosova because of pressure of Belgrade, and international reports showed this. You had industrial fraud in June 2017 elections and then in October 2019 elections, and in between the assassination of Oliver Ivanović in January 2018. We have to do something to address this. So, if you create ASMM in this context, when Belgrade defines being a Serb as a party membership rather than national identity, party membership of Vučić's party, then you would just legitimize this pressure from Belgrade, you would give nothing to Serbs of Kosova. That's why this is an additional argument why we cannot accept it.

NP: What do you mean exactly when you talk about replacing the 100% tax with reciprocity?

AK: Reciprocity is a constructive and healthy criteria of good neighbourly relations and bilateral relations in general. Driving licence of Kosova is not accepted in Serbia. If our truck driver with Kosovar goods goes to Serbia, he can get a fine of €800; the goods that he might have in the truck are not going to be allowed there because the certificate of the production will write Republic of Kosova - they're not going to accept it! Then in Gračanica you can have a Serb teacher who got her or his diploma in University of Niš, Kragujevac or Belgrade but an Albanian who graduated in University of Prishtina cannot teach in Bujanoc, Presheva or Medvegja. And this actually was signed as an agreement in Brussels but not implemented by Serbia. We need reciprocity in our relations, we need symmetry to have fairness in place in our bilateral relations.

NP: So you're talking about reciprocity on these kind of issues, technical issues?

AK: Yes, documents, certificates, travel documents, driving licence, for freedom of movement of people, services, capital, vehicles, buses, trucks and cars. So, full reciprocity. On 7th of December 2011, our parliament adopted a resolution for full political, economic and trade reciprocity with Serbia, but no government so far implemented it.

NP: It's always been the policy of the EEAS to let the leaders of the two sides report back on what they discussed and agreed in Brussels during the facilitated talks. This has resulted in misinformation and lack of transparency. How would you as a Prime Minister and, probably, leader of the, one of the leaders of the Kosovo side, change this?

AK: In the past, they said that, in the end, agreement will be passed in the parliament with 2/3 majority. I think we should not wait the end for 2/3rds majority, we should start from the very beginning with two thirds majority. I will create a negotiation team with two levels. One level, professionals and experts, technical level, and the other one the political representation level, where I would like to bring in opposition as well. And bringing them in means that we will create a national consensus. We should not allow Serbia as a wedge in our political scene as we have seen in the previous government, when they were passing with 59 votes out of 120, majority of those present in the plenary session, they passed the state delegation for dialogue with Serbia; it's not OK, you cannot do that. So, I will have a lot of internal dialogue for dialogue with Serbia. We need a consensus, national consensus. There are so many other things that we can quarrel about. Serbia shouldn't be one of them. And, of course, I will report regularly to the parliament because I would have to chair the team.

NP: You mentioned Mr Borrell who will literally in a few days time will be taking up his post as the EU High representative in a few days. He has said his first trip will be to come to Kosovo. What thinking and preparations have you already made for this visit? What are your objectives with this?

AK: Well, I want to see whether Mr Borrell will make a break with Ms Mogherini. It's important to know this. There is an open wound from the last two years of secret talks between two leaders regarding land swap or territorial exchange. Our president apparently had two years to convince people of Kosova to engage into this adventure. He failed to do so, instead he triggered the biggest protest against himself ever in Kosova's afterwar periods, namely 29th of September 2018 protest, when tens of thousands of people turned out on the streets of Prishtina under the motto 'A people does not subjugate to one man', to a man, to an individual being. So, we will need to close this wound. Their project of land swap failed. The idea is not dead yet.

I will propose three principles to close this wound. Number 1: No deal without dialogue. Because that's what they were trying to do, secret talks for a deal, for a quick fix. And they were concentrated a lot on *fiesta* after the deal rather than on the dialogue before the agreement. Second principle: No dialogue with maps. We can discuss about what should be the rights of the people, how we are going to relate to each other as two countries, what can we do to work together and cooperate, bilaterally or multilaterally; what are the needs of communities on both sides of the border. But we cannot do this with maps, as if we are some army generals of WW1 with not that sharp pens over maps trying to redraw and play with fire of geopolitics. No, no dialogue with maps! And principle number three - well, since maps will exist, we know that - No maps with presidents around them. Only experts of demarcation. No presidents around maps. So wherever there are maps, I don't want to see presidents around. This is principle number three. I look forward to discuss this with Mr Josep Borrell. This is crucial. To prepare the future dialogue, we have to close this wound.

NP: You said you want to talk to the Serb community, and you've been saying that for several years - it is very much one of your key objectives, to have normalisation with them. I cannot believe that you will only start doing this on Day 1 of the new government! How much talking have you already done with Kosovo Serb citizens, what have you learnt and what are your immediate aims resulting from this?

AK: I met with many Serbs all over Kosova while I was in opposition but they were very often meetings which they were afraid might get public and then they get hit by parallel structures of Serbia. So, now there will be a different phase because we will be in the government and we'll be able to protect them. Because it was difficult for me to meet with Serbs of Kosovo while our government was engaged in talks with Serbia **about** them, instead of talking directly to them. So, as opposition, it was difficult to do this dialogue from below while we had this other dialogue from above, of powerful governments on both sides.

On the other hand, to have a successful dialogue, you must be able to support it materially, financially, which a government can do. If Albanian farmers and Serbian farmers in one village agree about seeds and fertilisers and food processing, and agricultural market and how the state should subsidise it, then we can back them up. So, I think now it is much better and I look forward to meet with them and accomplish some joint projects. Not a dialogue for reconciliation. I don't need to reconcile with a Serb from Gračanica. What did they do to me? I didn't do nothing to them either. So reconciliation will take place when Serbia recognizes Kosovo, and faces its own past. You know, reconciliation is about past, agreement is about future. Reconciliation is about facts, agreement is about values. With Serbia, even when we agreed about values, we did not agree about facts. What happened in Kosova, they don't want to recognise, they don't want to acknowledge. I think that they don't want to recognize independence of Kosova because they don't want to recognise what they have done here. So, it has been shown as insufficient to agree about values, let's say European integration, peace, democracy, development, security, cooperation and all these things, as long as we do not agree about facts. So agreeing about values when you do not agree about facts renders fragile every agreement. And this reconciliation should not happen between Albanians and

Serbs from Prishtina and Gračanica. Dialogue from below therefore should not be dialogue about reconciliation, but dialogue for development, jobs and justice. And, you know, mafia, organized crime, is multi-ethnic. So, let's do some multi-ethnic fight against organised crime which is multi-ethnic. Jobs and Justice.

NP: When are you planning to meet President Vučić and/or Ms Brnabić?

AK: Well, I was supposed to go to Berlin now in a conference to be, I think, in a panel with Ms Brnabić but she cancelled that because she had some other things to do. Of course, we, in different settings, we are going to meet, for me that's not much of an event to be honest, you know. And it's not that, of course now I will be participating on different levels and I will be meeting them for sure. But dialogue under the facilitation of Brussels, that's a separate thing while these other things around, they may occur.

NP: Dialogue and normalisation are linked into Kosovo's EU membership, or its future EU membership - how important is that for you? And what would you change in your government's policy to deliver improved SAA implementation?

AK: We want to join the EU. Sooner, the better. Even though we know that it is not going to happen any time soon. I think best would be all 6 countries of the Western Balkans to join into EU at once, by 2030 or something like that. Just like the 10 countries from the Baltic states and Cyprus joined on 1st January 2004. If Serbia enters into EU before Kosova and Albania, I can foresee that Greece did nothing to Northern Macedonia what they will do to us. And if we join at the same time, it is going to be much easier for all countries around us, like Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece to accept it. Meanwhile, I believe, we need a sort of a mini Marshall plan, just like US did a Marshall Plan for Western Europe, we need a mini Marshall Plan EU for Western Balkans. Let's say divided towns like Mostar and Brčko, like Mitrovica and Shkup/Skopje, and also to bridge skills gap, like labour market equality of education, because there's a huge skills gap which causes migration of youth, and we have to fight authoritarianism, we have to fight corruption; we need democratisation and we have to be careful that the negotiations for membership for Serbia into EU did not democratize Serbia; Serbia was opening chapter after chapter in these EU accession talks and this did not increase the quality of democracy inside Serbia. Freedom House, Transparency International noticed a lot of regress there - so joining EU should help countries democratize further not the other way round. We have to make sure of this. And normalisation of relations between Kosova and Serbia should not be at the expense of normalising Serbia itself and normalising Kosova itself. So not only normalisation of relations between units but normalisation of units themselves as well, of these two states. Serbia is not a normal country because it's non democratic, plus it did not face its own criminal past. Kosova is not that normal country because of corruption and lack of development; and also the divided town of Mitrovica. So we have to normalize, to heal these two countries. And, you know, in psychology, normalisation means the absence of confusion between reality and fantasy. We must get rid of confusion between reality and fantasy. So, normalisation means also the second sentence of Serbia's Constitution be removed from there.

NP: I'll go to my last questions, and it links back into when you were talking about values and facts. Is there any sign of thinking how to improve the atmospherics, to create trust so issues can be solved in other fora and the Dialogue leads to what I call an acceptance of Kosovo's existence and does not remain a procedure combined with a policy of trying to undermine this; a policy of coexistence and acceptance of Kosovo, recognition of Kosovo, which puts peoples, human security and stability first?

AK: I think that to this end, we need to support progressive voices all over the region in civil society and in politics. Not only strong politicians who can deliver, but also voices of dissent, value-based ones, who might seem not powerful enough but perhaps this is so because they have not been helped and supported from outside enough, because many of the changes that happened in Europe is because of outside support, including D-day in Normandy, as we know, which helped a

great deal to end the WW2. So, there is needed more support from outside of democratic countries, progressive ones, liberal voices who are against authoritarianism, and so on and so forth, so this is one thing that should be done.

Then, I think, it is important to notice how much EU and Balkans are important for each other. Not only EU for the Balkans but also the Western Balkans for the EU. Maybe in a few decades historians will write that in the 20th century there were not two world wars (1st and 2nd). It was one with two episodes and it all started in Sarajevo, as we know. Balkans is very important, you know. Let's do something to include them at once in EU and some intellectuals, some diplomats, some politicians, should come up in EU and say Western Balkans 6 Initiative for 2030, I don't know, some new (Vaclav) Havel in EU, who would come up and say this. It is important, you know, some vision not just being cautious, just like this, how it can get worse, what we can lose, but you know like, Mr Juncker said 'not enlargement in my mandate,' as if he can control historical processes, you know, and we got Brexit. So it's like, if Europe is not going to expand, it will shrink, it's such a serious project. And Balkans has a huge diaspora in Europe, I think we should address them as a great potential for democratisation and development. Our best professors and students are not in Kosova anymore, they are in Germany, Switzerland, UK, Scandinavia. Also, our most successful businessmen are not in Kosova anymore, with the exception of these tycoons, oligarchs, who are a one digit number, but successful businessmen are not here. So brainwise and moneywise they should be used as a way to really rejuvenate our countries, 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and 20 years after the wars ended.