

R E V I E W

Regarding: the defence of the dissertation „*Kosovo-Serbia Conflict, from Negotiations for Final Status Resolution to Political Dialogue (2006-2016)*“ of Buiar Deskai - an independent doctoral student in the Department of Political Science at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field 3.3. Political Sciences, 05.11.02 Political Science.

By: Prof. Nikolay Naydenov, Doctor Habil, Department of Political Science, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

The Law for the development of the academic staff and the Regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” require the reviewer of a dissertation to take a stand on the procedures connected with its defence. In the present case, there are all grounds that legitimize the public defence: the dissertation was defended successfully by Deskai on January 21, 2021, in the Department of Political Science at Sofia University; the procedural deadlines are met, the dissertation is supported by six articles published by the author in English, Albanian and Bulgarian; the composition of the scientific jury meets the requirements of the Law and the Regulations of Sofia University.

The dissertation consists of 169 pages, divided into 5 chapters, conclusions, and recommendations, as well as an annex, including two tables - one presenting the phases of implementation of the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, and the other - the critical issues that are not included and must find a place in the dialogue between the two parties. The dissertation ends with a bibliography, in which the list of cited literature occupies four pages, and the used archival and documentary sources - five pages, followed by a list of twelve interviews with participants in the negotiations.

There are different types of dissertations, depending on where they put the emphasis. Some are conceptual and justify the need for a new look at a research object. Others study and compare processes and facts, and their conclusions stem from the obtained empirical results. Bujar Deskai's dissertation contains elements from both types of dissertations, but the leading point is something third: the processes he explores are not selected simply to write a dissertation, but processes in which he is involved in and which determine the perspectives of his own life. This puts a special "internal" imprint on the narrative, the priorities of the topics, and the chronology of events. In this sense, it is not the researcher who has chosen the object of study, but the object of study who has chosen its researcher. This distinctive feature is the best key to understanding and evaluating the dissertation.

The conceptual framework of the study includes the problems of the place of international conflicts in the system of international relations, the ethnic aspects of international conflicts, and the role of negotiations as a tool for conflict prevention and resolution. To give his theoretical assessment of the researched process, Deskai traces the following parameters of the negotiations: principles, approaches of the participants, quality of the negotiations and their results, the influence of internal and external factors on the researched process.

The author's analysis of international factors in the negotiation process deserves special attention. The active role of the United States in the early stages of the conflict is analysed as presented by the pressure on Milosevic, sanctions against Yugoslavia, and subsequent airstrikes. The role of the United States as a mentor and patron of the interim government was subsequently emphasized. Referring to Bergman's analysis, Deskai highlights three main differences between the UN-EU mediation of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Through its envoy, the UN exerts pressure to achieve concrete results, while the EU uses an indirect approach by seeking "normalization" in the relations between the two countries, with the expectation that after normalization the expected results will come. That is, the EU is presented more as an impartial "honest broker" between the two countries, trying to stimulate some, even compromise agreements. Deskai also analyses the strategies of Russia who is "too toxic and unreliable for EU or US leaders" and uses the Serbian authorities as a tool to influence. It is pointed out that Russia has begun to feel particularly comfortable after 2011 when EU-US cooperation weakened. Attention is also drawn to the ambiguous behaviour of

the Serbian president, who is behaving as a loyal partner of Russia and at the same time is ready to make concessions to Kosovo in the name of Serbia's rapprochement with the EU. This is one of the points which support Deskai's hope for the future. He mentions President Vucic's initiatives to mobilize some relevant non-political Serbian institutions (the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the media, etc.) in an attempt to reach a consensus in Serbia on the prospects of the country's EU membership, which implicitly presupposes recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty. By making sense of all these international aspects of the negotiation process, Deskai tries to shape his theoretical framework for future research on negotiations in the context of a crisis like this.

The author's main hypothesis tells that in the period following Kosovo's declaration of independence, the EU as the main actor in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has used contractual relations with conflicting countries to encourage them to make progress in the mediation process, while the other main actor, the UN, has mainly relied on external intermediaries. Several additional hypotheses have been formulated, which consolidate some of the conclusions of the dissertation. The first hypothesis states that the lack of unity in the EU on the issue of Kosovo's sovereignty introduces a stream of uncertainty into EU policy and hinders the implementation of the agreements. According to the second hypothesis, the crisis management models of the EU and the UN complement and legitimize each other. Besides, the operations of both organizations support rather than replace local authorities. The EU adopts an UN-close concept of crisis management, which includes three key principles: impartiality, limited recourse to force, and consent. The next hypothesis raises the question of the existence of "cold peace" and "hidden tension" in relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The other three hypotheses simply reflect the importance in the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations of several factors of universal importance: the parties' willingness to compromise, the dialogue as a prerequisite for good future interstate relations, and the influence of certain external and internal factors.

The methodological framework of this study includes predominantly qualitative methods, supported in places by quantitative data such as the trends in the number of agreements reached and implemented. The author also mentions the application of a "descriptive research approach", which describes the rich and full of vicissitudes chronology of events. These research methods

draw information from (i) the literature on international negotiations and mediation, (ii) official documents and archival sources, (iii) the available empirical data, and last but not least - the interviews with members of the negotiating teams.

The knowledge of the processes "from inside" allows the author to conclude that some exceptions to the theory of negotiations are necessary given the specificity of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. This specificity stems both from the positions of the participants and the role of the mediators in the dialogue between them. The positions of Kosovo and Serbia are diametrically opposed: Kosovo would accept nothing but the status of an independent state and Serbia adhering to its historical and constitutional arguments, is ready to accept everything but the independence of Kosovo. That is why Serbia vigorously opposes Kosovo's integration into all regional and international institutions. This specific feature of the Kosovo crisis is taking shape under the influence of many situational factors, the most powerful of which is the strong international response to the war between Kosovo and Serbia that resulted in UN and NATO intervention. Regardless of the support for Kosovo by many influential countries, some significant countries still oppose the recognition of Kosovo's international status. For instance, the effectiveness of EU mediation is declining because five of the Member States do not recognize Kosovo's sovereignty and this introduces some uncertainty into the EU's official position. Concerning Russia's geopolitical interests in the Balkans, it seeks realization through the active support of Serbia.

The main body of the dissertation traces the chronology of all international forums (conferences, negotiations, mediation missions, etc.) and the resulting documents. The dual role of this process is considered. On the one hand, it leads to significant steps forward, especially internally: the abolition of Serbia's parallel structures in Kosovo in the areas set out by the agreements; the establishment of an interstate border between Kosovo and Serbia; the takeover by the Kosovo authorities of the two border crossings in the northern part of the country; the integration of Serbian authorities into the management of northern Kosovo municipalities (four Kosovo municipalities are run by Serbian Kosovo mayors), the election of representatives of the Serb minority in all levels of Kosovan institutions; joining the Serbian military to the Kosovo Security Force. Thanks to these steps, the sovereignty of northern Kosovo has already been consolidated.

At the same time, however, Deskai repeatedly notes that the negotiation process could become counterproductive if it drags on too long, because this would give Serbia more time (i) for its aggressive campaign against Kosovo's membership in regional and international organizations and its sovereignty's recognition, (ii) to maintain strong power positions in Kosovo, through the Kosovo Serb parties, etc. Besides, the author worries that if Kosovo delays its European integration, the international confidence in Kosovo will decline, including the confidence of dominant factors such as the US and the EU. The consequences would be Kosovo's inability to join many important international organizations such as the Council of Europe, NATO, the OSCE, and the European Union.

The dissertation concludes with recommendations aimed at speeding up the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and bringing the prospects for their EU membership closer. These recommendations repeat most of the conclusions made in the text of the dissertation. Most distinguishable is the call for a more proactive EU position, including more intensive use of EU resources to pressure and stimulate Serbia to become more tolerant of the independence claim of Kosovo in the name of Serbia's European perspective. These recommendations are further evidence of the author's personal involvement in the problems of Kosovo-Serbia relations.

Buiar Descai's dissertation is devoted to a still unresolved issue in international relations. The novelty of this issue, as well as the author's commitment to it, explain some of the weaknesses in the narration. The conceptual framework remains somehow "dissolved" in the description of the numerous phases of the negotiation process, and the readers alone must discover and reconstruct it. For the same reason, some repetitions of the main topics and ideas appear. These weaknesses, however, do not change the overall positive impression of the work, which offers a comprehensive study that will turn inevitably into a guide for many future researchers. Finally, I would like to ask Boiar Deskai the following question: How would you formulate a point of view which could make compatible the Serbian national interest with Kosovo's interest in receiving international recognition and joining the EU?

Despite my critical remarks, Buiar Deskay's dissertation has the innovative potential necessary for a Ph.D. level. He examines a hot international topic that poses an important challenge to the system and theory of international relations. The author studies in a comprehensive style the negotiation process that precedes and serves the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. He draws conclusions that could enrich the conflict resolution theory and makes recommendations to the participants and mediators in this dialogue on how to accelerate and transform it into Euro-Atlantic integration of Kosovo and Serbia. The significance and timeliness of the topic, as well as its detailed analysis, give me reasons to call on the members of this distinguished jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to the independent doctoral student Buiar Descai.

19 May, 2021

Prof. Nikolay Naydenov, Doctor Habil

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