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**Kosovo** Media Highlights

**U.S. officials fail to convince Haradinaj to suspend tax (*dailies*)**

All papers cover the visit of the U.S. delegation consisting of the principal Director for European Affairs at the US National Security Council, John Erath, and the Balkans Director of the US National Security Council, Brad Berkley, to Kosovo where they met jointly Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj. Most of the papers however highlight that despite the clear message the U.S. officials conveyed regarding the need to suspend the tax on imports from Serbia and Bosnia, Haradinaj remains adamant in keeping the measure in place. ***Koha Ditore*** writes in its front page that despite the increased U.S. pressure, Haradinaj has not given signals that he plans to back down on the tax decision. It also reports that the meeting between Thaci, Haradinaj and U.S. officials lasted for about two hours and after Haradinaj left, Thaci and the U.S. delegation stayed on for another half an hour. The paper says the U.S. officials will also be in Pristina today where they are expected to meet opposition parties. ***Zeri*** also writes that Americans did not manage to convince Haradinaj to lift the tax. ***Bota Sot*** highlights in its coverage that Thaci and Haradinaj have different views on the tax while ***Epoka e Re*** quotes Thaci as saying that Kosovo is ready for a legally biding agreement with Serbia.

The U.S. officials did not make any statements to the media after the meeting while Haradinaj said he underlined in the meeting Kosovo’s irreversible commitment to strengthening of democracy and its institutions. “Kosovo is ready for a legally binding agreement that results in mutual recognition on existing borders and on 17 February 2008 Kosovo. In addition, it is ready to assume rights and responsibilities of membership in NATO, United Nations, EU and other international organisations,” Haradinaj wrote on Facebook. He said that Kosovo is engaged for free trade within the Western Balkans region and the agreement with Serbia would also have to regulate the free trade relations between Kosovo and Serbia. “Furthermore, Kosovo rests on the values of a multiethnic society based on human rights for all citizens and communities. We remain faithful to the permanent friendship and coordination of policies with the United States,” Haradinaj said.

Following the meeting, Thaci also issued a statement saying that the meeting focused on relations between Kosovo and the United States, the political situation in Kosovo and the region, and the dialogue with Serbia. “The senior US National Security Council officials, John Erath and Brad Berkley have reiterated the clear stance of the US administration that the tax must be suspended in order to continue the dialogue and efforts to reach a comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. President Thaçi has assured the senior US officials that, the Republic of Kosovo, by no means and under no circumstances, will endanger the inter-state relations and friendship with the USA,” Thaci’s statement reads. He added that Kosovo institutions should undertake concrete actions in accordance with the amicable advices of the USA as soon as possible. “These decisions should be in function of maintaining and strengthening the strategic cooperation with the USA and with our state commitment to the dialogue and a peaceful agreement”, Thaci said.

**Limaj: I hope we have a solution in line with U.S. advice (*RFE*/*Zeri*)**

Kosovo’s Deputy Prime Minister and co-head of negotiating team for dialogue with Serbia, Fatmir Limaj, said that the issue of the tax on imports from Serbia should be part of the negotiations in Brussels and that he hoped the decision on tax will be resolved in line with the U.S. requests. “Anytime advice or suggestions came from Washington, it was for the good of our nation and in this case for the good of Kosovo too and everyone is conscientious of this, including politicians. Therefore, they are very seriously receiving the advice and suggestions of our friends, the United States, and I hope we will have a solution which will be in line with advice from the U.S.,” Limaj told ***Radio Free Europe***.

Limaj said the tax should not be seen as an act of disobedience towards the U.S. but Kosovo wants to show it is an independent country and that this is how it should be treated by all. “I understand there are dilemma and concerns but in no way should this be seen as an act of disobedience towards the United States,” he added.

**President Thaci visits LDK leader Mustafa (*media*)**

All media report that Kosovo President Hashim Thaci visited the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) leader Isa Mustafa at his home on Wednesday evening. The meeting took place after President Thaci and Prime Minister Haradinaj met a high-level delegation from Washington.

An LDK spokesman told ***Koha*** that Thaci requested the meeting with Mustafa. “I can confirm that following a request from President Thaci, they met at Mustafa’s house and he [Thaci] informed him about today’s visit by U.S. officials and their requests to the ruling coalition,” the LDK spokesman said.

**Tahiri: Relations with U.S. are being damaged due to tax (*media*)**

Kosovo’s Minister of Justice, Abelard Tahiri, said on Wednesday that the United States of America are already taking actions against Kosovo as the latter is failing to heed their request on the 100-percent import tariff on Serbian and Bosnian goods.

Tahiri said in an interview to ***RTV Dukagjini*** that Washington’s position on the tariff is very clear. “It is important to see the official position of the U.S. It is important to see the effect of their actions. It is important to see the suspended technical assistance for the KSF and warnings that other funds too could be suspended … The visit by the Iowa Guard, scheduled for February 17, was cancelled. Our relations with the U.S. are being damaged,” he said. “I voted in favor of the tax, but now it is time to move to Plan B. This includes [PDK leader] Veseli’s proposal to suspend the tariff”.

**Arifi: Tariff on Serbia is not linked to Kosovo – US relations (*Telegrafi*)**

Avni Arifi, advisor to Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, said on Wednesday that the 100-percent import tariff on Serbian and Bosnian goods has nothing to do with relations between Kosovo and the United States of America.

“The people of Kosovo will always be aligned with the free nations led by the United States of America. This alignment has never been and will never be a decision of a local leader … The faith of the people of Kosovo derives from their faith in the democracy and freedom of the U.S. and values that this country stands for and upholds for centuries. The tariff on the Serbian state has nothing to do with our relations with the U.S.,” Arifi wrote in a Facebook post.

The news website notes that Arifi was part of the meeting that President Thaci and Prime Minister Haradinaj had with a senior delegation from Washington on Wednesday.

**Kosovo FM Pacolli writes open letter to Serbian President Vucic (*Kallxo*)**

Kosovo's Foreign Minister Behgjet Pacolli has written an open letter to President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic following the latter's meeting with Kosovo Serb representatives. “We are shocked with the fact that instead this meeting being a routine one, not to say constructive and peaceful, you state that you will refer to this meeting in high-level international correspondence, even with China. We do not understand the logic of ‘Chinese walls’ between our two countries which is in violation to the European approach,” Pacolli wrote adding: “Serbia and you as its President, should not aim to make Serbs from the Republic of Kosovo act as a separating wall for our inter-state disputes.”

Pacolli said Kosovo institutions are determined to implement and affirm human and constitutional rights of the Serb community in Kosovo. “This applies to all areas where this community lives, south, east, north or west of the Republic of Kosovo,” Pacolli said. He underlined that no one can dispute the fact that Serbs in Kosovo live in a safe environment and “your denial of facts is a sin.” “It is time for Serbia to allow Serbs to live their lives free of interference,” Pacolli declares.

**Tahiri: Tax, the only instrument blocking idea of border changes (*Epoka*)**

Former Minister for dialogue Edita Tahiri, said on Wednesday she supports the government’s position to keep the 100-percent tax on Serbian products in force. She told the paper that tax is the only instrument that is protecting Kosovo borders. Therefore, she considers that the tax should not be lifted until the Assembly of Kosovo votes the platform which sets the red lines on dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

Tahiri said that a broad-based government would be the best solution due to the processes Kosovo is going through.

**Ahmeti: EU should not remain silent to Serbia’s behaviour (RTK)**

Shpend Ahmeti, co-head of Kosovo’s state delegation in the dialogue with Serbia, took to Facebook to write that EU should not remain silent towards Serbia’s policies when Kosovo Serbs are concerned. He says that Belgrade has stepped up its political activity against the integration of Kosovo Serbs.

“Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic has encouraged Kosovo Serbs today not to be engaged in Kosovo institutions, as well as to leave Kosovo’s army which according to him “can commence only one service: kill Serbs,” Ahmeti wrote.

“Serbia’s state political violence against (integration) of Kosovo Serbs becomes more direct when Marko Djuric exercised direct pressure today towards the Kosovo’s new Minister for Agriculture, Dijana Zivic, with the same rhetoric as Milosevic’s, that ‘cooperation of Serbs with Kosovo institutions is an action against interests of Serb nation’. No reaction from EU once again,” Ahmeti wrote.

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