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**Kosovo** Media Highlights

**“U.S. delivers harsh blow to Kosovo” (*media*)**

The U.S. Embassy in Pristina issued a statement at the conclusion of the National Security Council officials' visit to Kosovo where they met Kosovo leaders and requested them to suspend the import tariff on products from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“National Security Council (NSC) Deputy Senior Director for Europe John Erath and NSC Director for European Affairs Brad Berkley met yesterday with President Thaci and Prime Minister Haradinaj, following their visit to Belgrade and meetings with Serbian government leaders. The visitors came to reinforce President Trump’s message “to seize this unique moment…and refrain from actions that would make an agreement more difficult to achieve.” They stressed in both capitals the White House’s concern the Dialogue must get back on track, and both parties must cease provocative actions and take constructive steps to return to the negotiating table. The visitors reiterated their message of a joint interagency letter February 11 that the tariffs on Serbian and Bosnian products are an impediment towards progress, undermine our partnership, and must be suspended to move the Dialogue with Serbia forward. They emphasized the urgency of Kosovo reaching a comprehensive normalization agreement with Serbia and U.S.-Kosovo alignment on this shared strategic interest,” the statement reads.

***Koha Ditore*** writes that the U.S. pressure has deepened the split between coalition partners as well as the Kosovo negotiating team for dialogue with Serbia. The paper adds that despite all this, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj remains adamant on his conditions for suspension of the tax. Under a separate box, the paper also quotes sources saying that the two U.S. officials said in their meetings yesterday that Kosovo should not bring the situation to an extent where the U.S. would review the option of withdrawing its peacekeeping troops from Kosovo. The same sources said the U.S. officials said they do not support the exchange of territories idea but they do support a demarcation process if the two sides agree to it. Under the headline, *Serious American Blow*, ***Zeri*** also quotes Koha reports that the U.S. has warned it could withdraw its troops from Kosovo if the tax is not suspended and underlined that the tax undermines Kosovo’s partnership with the U.S.

**Klan Kosova lists measures U.S. plans to take against Kosovo in case tax remains**

***Klan Kosova*** reports that the U.S. administration officials told Kosovo leaders about measures the U.S. can take against Kosovo if it continues to keep in place the import tariff on products from Serbia and Bosnia.

The officials made it clear that the tax needs to be immediately suspended to pave way for dialogue with Serbia. “If the tax is not lifted, there will be serious consequences. Apart from visa bans and suspension of assistance in the field of security, the failure to lift the tax and the blocking for the dialogue process could lead to the United States closing Bondsteel camp,” a source told ***Klan Kosova***.

The U.S. officials are said to have underlined that Kosovo cannot afford to act like Serbia which was in the past seen as blocking the negotiations.

“There is a perception in Washington that Kosovo is being destructive, and that Serbia is proving more constructive in relation to a final and legally-binding agreement which unblocks the frozen conflict. This perception about Kosovo did not exist in Washington before,” the U.S. officials said.

Erath and Bredley assured Kosovars that that they represent the position of U.S. President Donald Trump, thus commenting on speculation that there is confusion in the U.S. on what should be their approach to a final settlement between Kosovo and Serbia. The two U.S. officials assured the Kosovar side that they will work on stopping Serbia’s aggressive approach against the state of Kosovo. “We will try to stop the Serbian side in their destructive approach toward Kosovo,” the Americans said.

They also said a final settlement should be reached this year, otherwise Kosovo and Serbia could face the same problems for a long period of time. “We see that there is political readiness from both sides to resolve the problem. We haven’t seen this readiness before. The United States of America are ready to contribute to this agreement,” they said. The U.S. officials also denied speculation that there is a draft agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, which includes border demarcation, delineation or land swap. But they made it clear that parties must make compromises in order to reach a common agreement. “There is no written agreement. The parties must draft this agreement which would bring mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia and guarantee regional stability in the Balkans,” they said. According to Erath and Bradley, the mutual recognition would enable Washington to work with Russia so that the latter does not block Kosovo’s membership to the United Nations. “We will work with Moscow, we will help directly so that Russia does not obstruct Kosovo’s membership to the UN,” the Americans said.

**Haradinaj: Agreement with Serbia to respect Kosovo’s existing borders (*media*)**

Prime Minister of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj spoke about the meeting with U.S. officials from the National Security Council saying that he explained Kosovo’s arguments about the need for dialogue with Serbia to continue and end in a legally binding agreement that would respect Kosovo’s existing borders. Speaking to reporters at the Kosovo Assembly yesterday, Haradinaj said a comprehensive agreement would also regulate the issue of free trade between Kosovo and Serbia.

Asked about U.S. insistence on the tax on imports from Serbia and Bosnia being suspended, Haradinaj said: “The U.S. request for tax suspension of course is convincing. There are two views: One is that the tax is seen as an obstacle to dialogue and the other as a tool to help the agreement being reached as soon as possible. For as long as the tax is in force, the time cost Serbia more than Kosovo.” Gazeta Express meanwhile quotes Haradinaj as saying that his position on the tax remains firm in that it will not be lifted until Serbia recognises independence of Kosovo.

Haradinaj was also asked to comment on whether he thinks last night’s meeting between President Hashim Thaci and leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) Isa Mustafa is a signal that early elections are imminent to which he said he sees nothing wrong in the meeting taking place. “I think meetings, consultations between political leaders are good. I also have continuous meetings with Mr. Mustafa and Vetevendosje leader Albin Kurti, Shpend Ahmeti from PSD and coalition parties. I think consultations are a good thing,” Haradinaj said.

Later in the day after a meeting with representatives of the business community from Mitrovica, Haradinaj said he would reconsider the decision on tax if there is a “contract” on what Kosovo and Serbia agree to which would guarantee for the Kosovo borders to remain unchanged and for the Association of Serb-majority municipalities not to have executive powers. “We want to lift the tax but to do so in a very unclear process is not possible. It doesn’t make sense. As the people of Kosovo we cannot enter a headless process,” he said. Haradinaj said he thought it would be better for Kosovo to persist and “face the consequences if need be” than to end up with an agreement that would not be right for Kosovo.

**Thaci: Negotiating team members agreed to respect U.S. counsel on tax (*media*)**

President of Kosovo Hashim Thaci said in a statement following the meeting of the officials from the U.S. National Security Council, John Erath and Brad Berkley with the Kosovo Negotiating Team, respectively with the Deputy Prime Ministers Behgjet Pacolli, Fatmir Limaj, Enver Hoxhaj, Dardan Gashi and the PSD President Shpend Ahmeti.

Thaci spoke about the need for dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia to overcome current obstacles, including by heeding the U.S. advice to suspend the tariff on Serbia and Bosnia.

“It was a joint conclusion that the agreement must be a final one and with a mutual recognition. President Thaçi also reiterated the position that under no occasion or circumstance, the Republic of Kosovo may endanger the inter-state relations and its special friendship with the United States of America. All members of the Negotiating Team expressed their concerns on Belgrade’s aggressive stance, and at the same time reiterated their readiness to respect the US counsel on the suspension of the tariffs and recommencement of the dialogue in Brussels,” the statement reads.

**Ahmeti says he did not call for suspension of tax (*RTK*)**

Shpend Ahmeti, co-head of Kosovo’s Negotiating Team in discussions with Serbia, has reacted to the reports that the delegation requested suspension of 100-percent tax on Serbian products.

“Some media are reporting that the State Delegation allegedly was announced for suspension of the tax. The State Delegation has not been declared in favour of suspension of the tax. There are different subjective positions and they are already known to the public. Furthermore, I was not declared for suspension of the tax neither during these meetings nor in other meetings. We spoke about the justification of the tax and why it was required. The U.S. position is clear. The reason for the tax is also clear. It remains now to Kosovo to decide which is the strategic interest. Any action that is seen as personal victory and election victory, harms Kosovo and its negotiating position,” wrote Ahmeti.

**LDK leader Mustafa describes meeting with President Thaci (*media*)**

Most news websites cover Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) leader Isa Mustafa’s post on Facebook today in which he describes his meeting with Kosovo President Hashim Thaci on Wednesday evening. Mustafa wrote: “I met President Thaci at my house last night. He asked to inform me, as the leader of the biggest political party, about the requests but also warnings for very serious measures by the U.S. senior delegation vis-à-vis Kosovo. I expressed my and the LDK’s concern about the situation in which the ruling coalition has brought the country. I asked the President to withdraw from his orientation and political discourse on border changes, so that there can be a normal atmosphere for dialogue and to avoid the fear from dialogue. LDK under no circumstance agrees to dialogue on territory, because this can lead to the questioning of our statehood. I also reiterated that it is the responsibility of the ruling coalition to find a solution in order to safeguard partnership with the U.S., our strategic ally. I expressed the position of the LDK on dialogue and the need to go to elections, before dialogue, in order to secure legitimacy. I have noticed that there have been speculation and accusations about this meeting; some fools have even qualified it as treason. Such people are ignorant and spiteful. When the country’s interest and partnership with the U.S. are at stake, I will talk and meet with everyone, because I believe in the program and spirit of the LDK. LDK is a party that favors communication, we don’t shy away from meetings, because we stay true to our political oaths. The last couple of days I have also communicated with Prime Minister Haradinaj and Deputy Prime Minister Limaj. Earlier with Mr. Kurti too. We are all responsible for our country, both the government and the opposition”.

**Thaci’s initiative for becoming ‘godfather’ to a PDK-LDK coalition (*Zeri*)**

Until recently, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) kept insisting on early elections but some of its officials are now saying that a broad-based government would be a better solution, the paper writes. At the same time, the party leader Isa Mustafa met President of Kosovo Hashim Thaci and while he said that he made it clear in the meeting the LDK’s position on the need for Kosovo to head to fresh elections, coalition officials say it will be revealed in the coming days as to what exactly Thaci offered to Mustafa in exchange for the party joining the government. Analysts meanwhile note that Thaci could very well become a “godfather” to a possible coalition between the LDK and the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK).

**Limaj and Ahmeti: Americans asked what our requests are on tax (*media*)**

Co-heads of the state delegation for the dialogue with Serbia, Fatmir Limaj and Shpend Ahmeti, spoke about details of the discussions with U.S. officials on Thursday. They said that they were asked about Kosovo’s demands for Serbia in order to remove the 100-percent tax.

“They requested suspension with a deadline, in order to give a chance to the agreement. If there is no agreement, the tax can return in power. They said we are aware that this is a difficult decision for you, we know why you imposed tax, but we do not want the dialogue process to be blocked, said Ahmeti.

**Limaj: We will not allow opening of issue of territory of Kosovo (Epoka)**

Fatmir Limaj, leader of the Social-Democratic Initiative (NISMA) said they will not allow opening of the issue of the integrity and sovereignty of Kosovo.

He stressed that leaders of the political party he leads will never sign an agreement which is in contradiction with interests of Kosovo. He made these comments at the ceremony of the fifth anniversary of NISMA.

**Konjufca: Government mustn’t lift tariff without recognition (*Koha*)**

Vetevendosje MP Glauk Konjufca said on Thursday that the Haradinaj-led government must not rescind the 100-percent tariff on Serbian goods without first securing Serbia’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence. “I don’t think the tariff will be fatal to our relations with the United States of America,” Konjufca said in an interview to ***KTV***. “I think the U.S. would reconsider their presence in Kosovo only in one case, if someone stronger than them forces them to leave”.

Konjufca also said “international pressure should be on Serbia and not on Kosovo. Political parties must stand united. So far only the President is against the tax”.

**Deda: Thaci did not tell the truth about border correction idea (*media*)**

Kosovo Assembly member Ilir Deda said in an interview to ***RTK*** on Thursday that relations between Kosovo and the United States are at a very serious point, and not in a positive way.

Deda, who met the senior delegation from Washington, said Kosovo President Hashim Thaci did not tell the truth about the border correction idea. “For me it was very important that they understand that the border correction idea does not have support in Kosovo. This reality is clear to them too. Mr. Thaci did not tell the truth when he said that he has the U.S. support for the idea. All those that want Kosovo’s territorial integrity to be guarded should feel safer now,” Deda was quoted as saying.

**Selimi: Thaci plans to undo the Republic (*Zeri*)**

Rexhep Selimi, MP from Vetevendosje, said in an interview with the paper that President of Kosovo Hashim Thaci has undertaken an “aggressive” initiative which goes against Kosovo’s territorial integrity instead of him being its guardian. “Apart from his ideas, he also has plans to undo the Republic of Kosovo, as declared on 17 February. This is because the statehood would automatically be demolished if the Constitution and the territory were to change,” Selimi said. He said he believed protests may be inevitable to prevent such a scenario form unfolding.

**The personalization of the tax (*Kosova Sot*)**

The paper argues in its front-page editorial that Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj is refusing to listen to suggestions from Washington on the 100-percent tariff and that this “can result in irreparable consequences for our country”. The paper suggests that Haradinaj should immediately suspend the tariff and take over the reins of dialogue with Serbia. “In doing so, he would improve relations with the Americans and prevent Thaci from making border deals. If the current Prime Minister does not act this way, he will certainly be replaced,” the paper notes.

**Vucic: Serbian forces at Kosovo border in state of emergency (*media*)**

President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic has addressed threatening words towards Kosovo during his visit to Medvegje. He said Serbian forces at the border with Kosovo are capable of preventing any eventual attack against Serbian state and its population, which according to him “lives not only on this side of the border.”

"They are so much so superior and convincing in every sense, professionally and in numbers," he stressed, adding that there were "more than enough of them" on the administrative line (with Kosovo), that they could intervene "at any moment."

"As far as our forces are concerned, they are more than sufficiently represented to intervene at all times. They are disproportionately large in relation to the need. People should not worry," he underlined.

“Creation of the Army of Kosovo is terrible, while in Kosovo, Serbs are being promised castles and cities to become its part,” Vucic added.

**Ramadani: International partners should react to Vucic’s threats (*RTK*)**

Burim Ramadani, Deputy Minister of Defense, has requested from international partners to react on threatening rhetoric of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic. “The President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic has threatened Kosovo once again, saying that Serbian army is in the state of emergency at the border with Kosovo.

It should be clear to everyone that Vucic’s threatening language is unacceptable and brings further tensions. Furthermore, Vucic’s threats prove once again Serbia’s old claims.

Vucic should understand that Milosevic’s time is over. Genocide and ethnic cleansing helped also by Vucic himself, can never repeat,” Ramadani wrote.

**Dacic: Kosovo issue can be resolved by Serbia and Albania (*Express*)**

Serbia’s Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, said on Thursday that from the aspect of international law, an agreement between Serbia and Albania would be cleaner than the recognition of Pristina’s unilateral decisions. He added that these two countries can solve the Kosovo issue with “compromise and in a mutually acceptable way.”

Dacic spoke about the regional cooperation between Serbia and Albania at a press conference, during which he claimed that relations between Serbs and Albanians should be resolved in cooperation with the Republic of Albania and that the solution achieved in that way would be “cleaner in relation to international law.”

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