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## MACEDONIA DEAL HEIGHTENS PRESSURE ON SERBIA, KOSOVO

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Diplomatic and Balkan experts say the announced solution to the Macedonia-Greece "name" dispute will add to the pressure on the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo to finally solve their own dispute over the former Serbian province's status and future.

There is already strong pressure on Serbia, especially from Berlin, to strike a final agreement that would in effect recognize Kosovo, and Chancellor [Angela] Merkel as well as the EU would like to see such an agreement before the end of the year," Toby Vogel told BIRN.

"The Macedonia name deal won't change this basic dynamic but could perhaps encourage Presidents [of Serbia, Aleksandar] Vucic and [of Kosovo, Hashim] Thaci by showing them what courageous leadership can achieve, the co-founder and senior associate of the Democratization Policy Council said.

Vogel added that for that reason, it is critical that when EU leaders meet for the June European Council, they give the green light for membership talks to start with both Macedonia and Albania, rewarding the two countries for constructive diplomacy and tough reforms at home.

Macedonia's new government led by Zoran Zaev reached last week a historic deal with Greece aimed at ending the long dispute over Macedonia's name □ although it faces stiff opposition from nationalist critics in both countries.

Under the agreement, the Republic of Macedonia is to change its name to Republic of North Macedonia in exchange for swift accession to NATO and the start of EU accession talks.

Macedonia's President has denounced the deal, which also has to go to a referendum in the country.

But, if the issue is finally resolved, the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo will be more exposed as one of the biggest remaining disputes in the Balkans.

Eric Gordy, Professor of Political and Cultural Sociology at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College, London, told BIRN that Vucic is probably aware that he is expected to reach some kind of agreement with Kosovo now.

It is also probably clear to everybody what an agreement would entail: recognition, strong guarantees of minority protection and representation, and some measure of autonomy for the

northern [Serbian] municipalities, he added.

The main reason an agreement has not been made yet, according to Gordy, is that Vucic is afraid of the political costs, and unaware of the political benefits.

This is an odd position for a politician with a near-monopoly of power and nearly complete control of the media to be in, he noted.

Gordy underlined that what made the "name" agreement possible is that both Greece and Macedonia have heads of government who understand the need to settle conflicts and are willing to face down their domestic hardliners to achieve this. He added: This does not appear to be the case in Serbia and Kosovo.

Marko Kmezic, a researcher at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, in Austria, told BIRN that in the two outstanding statehood issues in the Balkans, over Greece-Macedonia and over Serbia-Kosovo, it is not so obvious that the EUs leverage is the same as in Macedonias case, where the Greek veto pushed back Macedonias bid for Euroatlantic integration for over a decade.

Kosovo, on the other hand, remains unrecognized by five of the 28 EU member states – Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus.

He added that this is why it is important to know exactly what are topics of the mentioned bilateral meetings President Vucic has with his European counterparts, as pressure on Serbia will likely grow, but not in form of clear EU demands for recognition but rather taking the shape of bilateral conditions voiced by the stronger EU member states.

Only by confronting the past in a more transparent and honest way will Serbia be ready to decide on its future, with or without increased EU pressure, Kmezic concluded.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-greece-solution-to-encourage-serbia-and-kosovo-leaders-06-15-2018>

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