
U.S. DIPLOMAT SAYS KOSOVO SHOULD LIFT TARIFFS ON SERBIA, WORK TO 'NORMALIZE' RELATIONS

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11.06.2019

RFERL (10 June 2019)

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer has said during a visit to Belgrade that Kosovo's tariffs on imports from Serbia are "an obstacle" to the "future of the region."

Speaking to journalists in Belgrade after talks on June 10 with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Palmer said an "EU-led dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina" that leads to the full normalization of relations "could open up a European path for both Serbia and for Kosovo."

But Palmer said tariffs imposed by Kosovo in December 2018 were "an obstacle to that."

"We would like to see the tariffs lifted or suspended in such way that would allow the parties to return to the negotiating table, to reach an agreement that would support and facilitate a European future for all the people of Serbia and Kosovo and the Western Balkans," Palmer said.

Palmer said Washington was hopeful that a summit scheduled in Paris on July 1 will be a "constructive and productive" way to help get the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue moving toward "an agreement on normalization."

But the Serbian president expressed doubts.

"I am not sure whether the meeting in Paris will be held at all," Vucic said. "We are prepared for that meeting, but I don't think anyone wants to hear how some people don't want to lift tariffs. Therefore, I'm not sure."

"What is most important is that together with our German and French partners we all do everything to preserve the peace and stability, Vucic said. "Those things are always more important than one, two, or five meetings."

Vucic also said talks with U.S. officials were "never easy" because "the United States recognized Kosovo as an independent country," while Belgrade continues to insist that Kosovo is part of Serbia.

"What we agree on is that only through talks and negotiations, as well as with respect toward both Albanian and Serbian people, a solution can be reached," Vucic said.

Belgrade's crackdown during the 1990s against ethnic Albanians in its then-province of Kosovo ended following a NATO air campaign in 1999.

Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 -- nearly a decade after the 1998-99 war that killed some 13,000 people.

Serbia considers Kosovo the cradle of its history and religion, and the preamble to the Serbian Constitution describes Kosovo as an "integral part" of its territory.

In recent weeks, raids by Kosovar police in Kosovo's ethnic Serb-dominated north have exacerbated tensions and threatened to ignite fresh violence.

European Union foreign-policy chief Federica Mogherini has warned that "the status quo is not sustainable and that both Pristina and Belgrade need to come back to the dialogue table."

"I see the risk of the dark forces of the past coming back, in terms of confrontation, even of conflict" if the two sides continue facing off, Mogherini said on May 30.

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