

Brussels Dialogue: Next Steps and Challenges Ahead

CIG organized in November 2015 in Vienna, Austria, a roundtable for senior Kosovo and Serbian government and EU and Swiss officials to discuss next steps in the continuation of the dialogue and the implementation of the reached agreements. This turned to be the only meeting of the parties during the last quarter of 2015. The dialogue is losing popularity, especially in Kosovo, where the opposition parties are strongly objecting the formation of the Association/Community and started a political crisis there. Kosovo's Constitutional Court is reviewing the legality of the Association/Community. Until then, the team to draft its statute cannot be formed, though some speakers said that the management team could start working. There are delays in the implementation of other agreements, such as integration of judicial structures in the north, and confusion about some other, such as closing of the parallel interim municipal councils, which are not addressed by the Brussels agreement.

Despite recent setbacks, the participants confirmed their governments' commitment to continuation of the dialogue, but pointed out that it needs new dynamics, including a better communication between the teams and more international commitment, including in interpreting the agreements and assessing progress in implementation. The Serbian participants focused largely on the formation of the Association/Community, while the Kosovo speakers said that the dialogue should have a clear vision with clear timeliness about the end result. Following are concluding points from the discussion.

- Pristina and Belgrade should commit to implementing the Brussels agreement in full by end of 2016. The agreement should include the dismantling of the remaining parallel institutions and establishment of the Association/Community.
- Bilateral meetings between Serbian and Kosovo officials should be intensified. Such meetings should include meetings of ministers, directors of police, professional staff of ministries. As one speaker put it, “the more we talk, the better we understand each other and the fewer problems we have.” In this context, participants also suggested to establish a hotline between the prime ministers' offices.
- Establish cooperation on less sensitive areas such as EU integration related issues. Participants suggested cooperation on the action plan for the SAA implementation and translation of the Acquis. The public is less sensitive about such technical issues.
- Continuation of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is important but internal stability takes precedence. Belgrade and Pristina should manage setbacks patiently and preserve the internal stability while remaining committed to the dialogue. Dialogue has triggered some strong protests in Kosovo. At the beginning, in 2011, under the government of the Democratic Party, the dialogue was not popular in Serbia while it had consensus in Kosovo. The opposition to the dialogue from the current

main governing party, then in opposition, was strong. The situation has reversed now. There is almost full consensus between Serbian governing and opposition parties for supporting the dialogue, but strong opposition to it by Kosovo's opposition parties and skepticism by governing parties.

- Pristina says there is a direct link between dismantling of interim municipal councils and forming of the Association/Community. Belgrade says no such link exists. Pristina demands the dismantling of all parallel structures, including interim municipal councils, which are not included in the Brussels agreement. Belgrade explained that interim municipal councils offer a number of services for Kosovo Serbs, such as in distributing welfare, thus suggested that new mechanisms should be in place to provide such services before these councils are dismantled. Kosovo speakers said that but the municipalities could offer these services. So far only Mitrovica north is integrated; the other three municipalities in the north have Kosovo-elected mayors but Serbian administration.
- Establish a working group on finding a solution for disbanding the interim municipal councils.
- Some speakers said that the management team on drafting the statute of the Association/Community could start working on it. A Kosovo speaker, however, said that it might not be legal for as long as Kosovo's Constitutional Court does not come up with a decision on the legality of the Association/Community.
- Belgrade and Pristina need to work together to build a fact-based narrative about the dialogue, pointing out its results rather than trying to undermine each other. Government officials in Belgrade and Pristina need to talk more about the benefits of the dialogue for the citizens. Prime ministers Isa Mustafa and Aleksandar Vucic should give substantive interviews to each other's media. Serbia's main negotiator Marko Djuric could also have a debate on Kosovo television, or Kosovo's main negotiator Edita Tahiri give a lecture in Belgrade. Such communication would help understanding of the complexities of the dialogue and of the benefits. Using the facts in support of a positive narrative, the officials in these media and public exchanges could show that there are benefits from the dialogue, such as removal of car insurance fees, freedom of movement, integration of police in the north, etc.
- The status issue reemerges time to time and remains an obstacle to the dialogue in Brussels and to the normalization process in general.

Participants concluded that the dialogue is not popular in Kosovo or Serbia. At the beginning the rationale for the dialogue was said to be "adjusting to reality," that Kosovo Serbs integrate into Kosovo's system but it is increasingly dealing with more sensitive issues, such as telecommunication, energy, and in the near future will most likely deal with the status. Many said the opening of chapter 35 in Serbia's EU accession negotiations will bring new dynamics to the dialogue. Some reported that a "legally-binding agreement" is a condition for successful completion of the chapter.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- David Cullen**, Head of the Unit for Kosovo, DG NEAR, European Commission
- Marko Djuric**, Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the Government of Serbia
- Shpetim Gashi**, Vice President of the Council for Inclusive Governance
- Bajram Gecaj**, Deputy Minister of Local Government Administration of Kosovo and Senior Political Adviser to the Prime Minister of Kosovo
- Alex Roinishvili Grigorev**, President of the Council for Inclusive Governance
- Barbara Jesus-Gimeno**, Political Desk for Serbia, DG NEAR, European Commission
- Krystyna Marty Lang**, Ambassador of Switzerland to Kosovo
- Ksenija Milenkovic**, Director of the Office for European Integration of the Government of Serbia
- Tanja Miscevic**, Head of Negotiating Team for the Accession of Serbia to the European Union
- Jean-Daniel Ruch**, Ambassador of Switzerland to Serbia
- Saskia Salzmann**, Regional Human Security Adviser, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland
- Blerim Shala**, Kosovo Coordinator of the Dialogue with Serbia
- Edita Tahiri**, Minister without Portfolio in the Government of Kosovo responsible for Dialogue with Serbia
- Talia Wohl**, Program Officer, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland
- Samuel Zbogar**, EU Special Representative in Kosovo