

## Integration, resisted but inevitable

If you organize a referendum on Serb integration in Kosovo's north, the results would be overwhelmingly against it. Though Pristina and the Albanian population publically support integration, they don't seem to want it either, some speakers argued. "Nobody wants integration, but it is an inevitable evil and we have to find a way to do it, the sooner, the better." Albanians are not ready to share state responsibilities with the Serbs. Serbs are also not ready to assume such responsibilities. As a result, we have a superficial integration, not a substantive and sustainable one, which largely depends on the whims of political leaders, who can strengthen or weaken it with a few political statements, many speakers concluded at a roundtable organized by the Council for Inclusive Governance in Pristina on February 22, 2016.

The roundtable is part of project on relations between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs and on normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade. The project is supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Many Kosovo Serbs feel stateless. Serbia is phasing out its institutions while the newly established Kosovo local institutions aiming to replace the Serbian ones do not function when it comes to offering services to citizens, especially in the north. "We have elected mayors and assemblies, but two years after the only people they serve are themselves," a speaker argued. They receive salaries and other benefits, but haven't established any services.

Serbia's political structure in Kosovo has been gradually dismantled and integrated into Kosovo's system. Police and Civil Protection, considered the most sensitive, have already been integrated. An agreement on courts has been reached, though its implementation is being delayed. Kosovo Serbs are worried what is going to happen with the service structures: education, healthcare, and a number of other institutions, such as Serbian post offices. Many speakers said that the Serbian service institutions should be regulated, and Belgrade should be allowed to fund them.

This brief report is based primarily on the roundtable but also on individual discussions. The conclusions were not based on consensus but reflect the views of different participants. We have tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions, and ask for the understanding of participants whose remarks may have not been fully captured in this brief report, for which CIG accepts sole responsibility. The roundtable discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule.

### Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. Draft the Association/Community's statute.** The Association/Community is the main issue dividing Serbs and Albanians nowadays. There is an evident fear among some of the Albanian parties about the Association/Community, believing that it "returns Serbia to

Kosovo.” A speaker said that the best way to “disarm these parties from their fears” is to write the statute and everyone would be able to see that the Association/Community is not “a state within a state,” but simply an organization that aims to improve practical conditions for the Serb community. The longer the statute remains in a limbo, the more people would believe it is really an “evil” institution. Some expressed doubts that the existing team, consisting of four Serbs, has the capacity to draft a statute acceptable for both sides. Therefore, they suggested that Pristina and Belgrade should establish a team of experts to draft the statute.

- 2. Organize debates on the substance of the Association/Community.** The debate over the Association/Community has been mostly about symbolism and how it would advance national issues, but its role and substance remain unclear to both Serbs and Albanians. Kosovo Serbs should have public debates about the concrete role and responsibilities of the Association/Community: how it would improve services for Kosovo Serbs? How it would improve education and health? What would the Serb-majority municipalities benefit from such an umbrella organization? How to respond to the fear it has created within the Albanian community? How would it specifically improve economic development? What about urban planning, will it be able to stop illegal construction? How it would create more jobs?
- 3. Improve quality of communication between Serb representatives and Kosovo’s government.** The communication between Serb political representatives and Kosovo’s government remains dominated by abstract and symbolic issues. A speaker said that the Serb government officials through their political statements are more interested in advancing their careers than the interests of Kosovo Serbs. Many speakers asked that the communication be about concrete problems confronting Kosovo Serbs. “It is irrelevant for Kosovo Serbs whether a Serb minister feels his prime minister is Serbia’s Aleksandar Vucic or Kosovo’s Isa Mustafa; what is relevant is that he tackles the issues confronting the Serbs.” Such statements do no good to the Serb community, they simply distract attention from real issues. And in the eyes of the Albanians, such statements portray Kosovo Serbs unnecessarily as a threat to Kosovo’s state. “Our local representatives should address our local problems. Let Belgrade deal with national issues.” Kosovo Serbs remain skeptical of Kosovo’s government. Albanian officials invent all kinds of obstructions just to delay integration, a speaker said. Kosovo Albanian political leaders should show that the Serbs are indeed wanted in Kosovo.
- 4. Establish regular substantive discussions between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo’s opposition parties.** Although Kosovo’s opposition supports the integration of the Serb community, some of their actions, especially their opposition to the Association/Community, indicate the opposite. Kosovo Serbs fear the program of the Self-Determination Movement (VV) the most. Although they preach a civic state—equal individual rather than ethnic rights—there are inconsistencies between what they say and what their party program promotes. VV’s main objective is unification with another state based on shared ethnicity. It prefers Albanian ethnic symbols over Kosovo’s civic ones. If VV does not believe in Kosovo, how can Serbs? Many speakers expressed doubts about any substantive cooperation with VV, but supported an eventual initiative for discussions with them. Some speakers understand the anger of Kosovo Albanians for statements such as “I’m Aleksandar Vucic’s minister in Kosovo, not Isa Mustafa’s,” but believe VV overreacts to

such statements. “If a Kosovo Albanian minister says ‘I’m Edi Ramas’ minister, not Isa Mustafa’s,’ would VV ask to ban the minister’s party?” a speaker asked. VV may feel threatened by Belgrade’s involvement in Kosovo Serb affairs, but Kosovo Serbs feel just as threatened by their party program, a speaker argued. VV keeps using ethnic issues to mobilize the people. “It’s no secret that organized crime and corruption are more urgent issues than the Association/Community. Yet, VV uses the Association/Community to mobilize protesters against the government.” The good news is, a speaker added, that ethnic issues, whether among Serbs or Albanians, are not as effective as before in mobilizing people. Many speakers suggested that Serb political representatives should be more cautious in their public statements and that VV should become more conciliatory towards the Serb community.

- 5. Kosovo Serbs should be involved in the debate about elections.** Kosovo Serbs remain divided over an eventual early election. Some say the mandate of this government should be completed. Others argue that a new election might bring better Serb political representation. Some were neutral.
- 6. Belgrade funding should become fully transparent to alleviate Kosovo Albanian fears.** Serbian funding for Kosovo Serbs is critical, just like Kosovo’s diaspora remittances for Kosovo Albanians. Neither Serbs nor Albanians could survive without such financial assistance. However, to alleviate the fear of the Albanians, many speakers suggested that Belgrade become fully transparent with its funding, to show that its funding is dedicated to improve the wellbeing of the Serb community, and not to undermine Kosovo’s institutions. A speaker argued that a community of 90 percent shouldn’t feel threatened by a community of 5 percent.
- 7. The Brussels dialogue should give greater attention to real the issues confronting Serbs in Kosovo.** The dialogue in Brussels does not discuss real problems of Serbs in Kosovo. A bridge over the Ibar is not an issue for the Serbs but economic development most definitely is.

The participants concluded that Kosovo Serbs in local and central institutions should fulfill their institutional responsibilities and that their success should be measured by results for their communities. Although they supported a stronger Serb involvement in Kosovo’s issues, they said that Serbs shouldn’t be involved much in the intra-Albanian crisis, but they shouldn’t stay indifferent either because the outcome, such as an early election, would affect them too.

In consultation with the project participants and Swiss partners, CIG plans to follow-up on the issues it believes it could contribute to bring better understanding and help create preconditions for their resolution.

## Participants

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