

Parliamentarians of Kosovo and Serbia Support University Diploma Recognition

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on June 27, 2015 in Pristina its third roundtable in the series for members of parliaments of Kosovo and Serbia. In the previous two roundtables, held in Pristina and Belgrade, the parliamentarians discussed models of cooperation between the two parliaments. They agreed to engage in direct cooperation to support the resolution of concrete issues as well as to contribute to the overall normalization of relations between the two societies. In the third meeting, the overwhelming majority of participants agreed to institutionalize this parliamentary cooperation through an informal mechanism named “Group for Cooperation.”

Roundtable participants included members of parliament from Kosovo’s Democratic Party of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo, Self-Determination Movement, Serb List; and members of parliament of Serbia’s Serbian Progressive Party, Socialist Party of Serbia, Democratic Party, Social Democratic Party, the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, Preokret Movement, and Party for Democratic Action. Representatives of the Serbian and Kosovo governments were invited to take part in the afternoon session.

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The Group for Cooperation addressed the issue of university diploma recognition. Despite an agreement between Pristina and Belgrade reached in 2011, only five 15 diplomas out of a total of 433 applications have been recognized to date and the process has stalled. It particularly affects Kosovo Serbs who have studied in Serbia and are looking for employment in Kosovo and Albanians from Serbia who have studied in Kosovo and are looking for employment in Serbia. Some speakers said that the process has been suspended because of the lack of appropriate technical procedures and that Belgrade and Pristina are working on it, but the majority of the speakers believe the problems are political rather than technical. They suggested that the European Union, as facilitator of the implementation, should intervene to break the deadlock.

This report offers a brief overview of the roundtable discussions. To encourage frank discussions, the roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule, thus remarks have not been attributed to specific speakers.

Group for Cooperation

By establishing the Group for Cooperation, members of both parliaments committed to support the normalization of relations between the two societies and to contribute to the implementation of the Brussels Agreement. As one participant said, “normalization delayed is normalization denied.”

The participants recommended that the Group for Cooperation meets about four times a year and addresses practical issues in which their official capacities allow them to contribute the most. In addition, they will intensify their engagement in normalization of relations, particularly in advocating for certain agreements, shaping public debates in their own societies, and improving their publics’ perceptions of one another. As a speaker said, “in order to have normal relations between our societies, we first need to have normal relations within our societies.” “We need to change the current discourse in Kosovo and Serbia,” said another speaker.

The participants want to see more active participation in this process of MPs representing the Serb List in the Kosovo parliament.

The speakers reported considerable progress in the level and quality of communication between members of the two parliaments. “Until recently, the debates focused on symbolism, where we spent hours bickering over Republic of Kosovo or Kosovo and Metohija. We have passed such hurdles now and are addressing real issues.”

Despite considerable progress, many said that the international community should continue to lead the process but that the willingness of Pristina and Belgrade to assume a larger share of responsibility in the process is growing.

There are more and more visits of Kosovo government officials, including ministers, to Serbia and vice-versa. A Kosovo speaker reported that Pristina was encouraged that Serbia did not block Kosovo’s participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Another Kosovo speaker said that it is obvious that cooperation and resolution of disputes is in the interest of both sides and that direct meetings and personal relations between members of parliaments is a good tool to build momentum for normalization of relations. In this context, he suggested that a number of MP’s from Serbia and Kosovo take part in joint TV debates in Kosovo and in Serbia. “Changing the public opinion in favor of normalization is even more important than changing governments,” a speaker said.

A number of speakers emphasized the urgency for the resolution of issues that affect peoples’ daily lives, such as car plates, phone roaming, university diplomas, and recognition of trade documents. A speaker noted that Serbia is Kosovo’s main importer, covering over 25 percent of Kosovo’s import at a value of about 800 million euros annually, but it does not recognize documents of Kosovo’s companies.

Recognition of diplomas

Complicated relations between Serbia and Kosovo reflect also on recognition of university diplomas. Pristina and Belgrade in 2011 reached an agreement for the recognition of diplomas as part of the Brussels dialogue. According to the agreement, the European University Association (EUA), a Brussels-based institution representing universities in 47 countries, through the contracting agency Spark would certify diplomas issued by universities in Kosovo and Serbia so that they are recognized in both Serbia and Kosovo.

According to education policies in Serbia and Kosovo, the ultimate body competent for the recognition of diplomas is the university to which the student applies. Each university adopts its own rules that regulate the recognition procedure. There are no clear and harmonized criteria and the process is still being carried out as a “nostrification” rather than a “recognition” procedure. Nostrification is a procedure focused more on comparison of the program of the foreign higher education institutions than on learning outcomes. If there are significant differences in the courses, the applicant might be required to pass additional exams. So students can apply to universities for recognition after they receive the certificate from the EUA, but recognition and nostrification of diplomas is up to universities.

Though the EUA had certified over 400 diplomas from Kosovo and Serbia, Belgrade has recognized only 15, while Pristina has not recognized any. A Kosovo government representative said that Kosovo has not been able to do so because it lacks administrative directives to regulate the process. However, other Kosovo officials have admitted that non-recognition was also a response to Serbia’s introduction of additional hurdles to the Kosovo applicants whose diplomas were recognized. Reportedly, Serbia instituted additional steps in the recognition process not foreseen by the agreement. Furthermore, in May 2015 Serbia’s Constitutional Court ruled that the agreement on recognition of Kosovo’s diplomas was unconstitutional. The Serbian government, however, has found a way around it by issuing a new decree enabling recognition.

The recognition and nostrification procedure is complicated, long, and expensive. It is reported that it can last for up to two years and cost up to 300 euros, mostly in document translation and university administrative fees. These complicated procedures in Serbia and Kosovo apply to all students with foreign degrees.

The university in Mitrovica was not included in the 2011 agreement. The overwhelming majority of Kosovo Serbs obtain diplomas from that university, which is not recognized by Pristina. Consequently, graduates of university in Mitrovica cannot work in Kosovo’s central or local institutions. The roundtable participants said that a separate agreement on the university in Mitrovica is needed. Kosovo’s government is putting together a proposal for a temporary solution, which would not include recognition of the university but would recognize its diplomas thus allowing its graduates to be employed in Kosovo’s public institutions. A commission would issue necessary certificates to the graduates of the university in Mitrovica who then would be able to work in Kosovo’s institutions. Kosovo

government officials say the commission will begin working by November 2015. The plan, however, will have to be approved by Kosovo's parliament.

Follow-up steps

1. Kosovo's and Serbia's ministries of education should submit reports on the diploma recognition to their parliaments explaining why the process has stalled.
2. Parliamentary committees of Serbia and Kosovo should request a report from the European Union asking whether the contracting agency, Spark, can continue to help with the process or they should contract another organization to mediate with the EUA. Spark's contract with the EUA has expired. Parliamentarians should also look into possibilities of drawing up their own proposals to resume the process.
3. Ministries of education of Kosovo and Serbia should cooperate directly to eliminate technical hurdles to the process. They should centralize the process of diploma recognition and develop appropriate procedures to regulate and expedite the process. They should coordinate with universities so as the recognition and nostrification process does not take two years.
4. Two members from each parliament agreed to lead the follow-up with their governments and parliaments and report to the next meeting of the Group for Cooperation in the fall.

Participants

Besim Beqaj, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Gordana Comic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Democratic Party
Aida Corovic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Democratic Party
Iilir Deda, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Self-Determination Movement
Blerta Deliu Kodra, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Sadri Ferati, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Blerim Grainca, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Biljana Hasanovic Korac, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Social Democratic Party
Riza Halimi, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Party for Democratic Action
Nada Lazic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina
Ganimete Musliu, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Vladimir Orlic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Zenun Pajaziti, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Krstimir Pantic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Slobodan Petrovic, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Srpska List
Dejan Radenkovic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia
Katarina Rakic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Branko Ruzic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Socialist Party
Teuta Sahatqija, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Janko Veselinovic, Member of the Parliament of Serbia (independent)
Armend Zemaj, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Bujar Gallopeni, Coordinator for International Cooperation, Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology of Kosovo
Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Valerie Hopkins, Journalist, Balkan Investigative Regional Reporting Network, BIRN Kosovo
Arber Kuci, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance
Kristina Marty Lang, Ambassador of Switzerland to Kosovo
Igor Novakovic, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance
Predrag Nikolic, Deputy Liaison Officer to the EU Mission in Pristina
Pablo Padrutt, Attaché, Swiss Embassy in Kosovo
Dejan Pavicevic, Liaison Officer to the EU Mission in Pristina
Saskia Salzmann, Regional Human Security Adviser, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland
Talia Wohl, Program Officer, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland