

Parliamentary Cooperation in Normalization of Relations

On June 25-26, 2016, in Podgorica, Montenegro, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized its fourth roundtable of members of parliaments of Serbia and Kosovo. The objective of the meeting was to assess the relations between Kosovo and Serbia, search for ways to contribute to the resolution of outstanding issues, and chart a plan of future activities for the Group for Cooperation of MPs of Kosovo and Serbia formed at their last meeting in Pristina.

The roundtable is part of a larger CIG project supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Relations between Serbian and Kosovo Albanian societies continue to suffer from the past. Anger and revenge are not giving way to maturity and compromise, and thus preventing the two societies from making rational choices, a Serbian parliamentarian said. She called on her colleagues and on the governments of Kosovo and Serbia to resolve the disputes now and not leave them to future generations. “Do we want our kids to hate each other just like we do now?” She said that politicians could reverse the hostile process of the past decades with a “little extra effort and some political will.” “It is our choice, she added, whether to block the process or to move it forward.”

Regarding the role of the Parliaments, a speaker called on the participants to establish more rigorous monitoring and oversight over their governments, invite government officials to parliamentary hearings more often, and engage in public outreach. He concluded that normalization is not simply a process of two groups of people from the two governments but rather a process between the two societies, and thus parliamentarians should take a more active role in this process.

Supporting the statements of previous colleagues, a Kosovo parliamentarian said that politicians in Kosovo and Serbia have entered a vicious circle and are currently stuck, mostly because they are not speaking openly about the reality to their own people. As an example of regress in relations, he took the integration of Kosovo Serbs into the Kosovo society and system of governance. The Serbs, he said, have taken steps back in this integration and blamed both Pristina and Belgrade for this outcome. The speaker argued that Kosovo and Serbia, Serbs and Albanians should do more themselves rather than wait for the EU to come up with solutions and compromises for them. One of the participants said that the Brussels dialogue is “losing its substance.” A number of participants argued that the EU is losing its influence in the region and membership in the Union is not considered as big of an incentive as before.

Communication around the dialogue also remains a problem. Government officials agree on something in Brussels and then use negative language on the other side and offer conflicting or incorrect interpretations of what they have agreed on. The speaker noted that it is clear that negotiators often have to agree with things they do not like, but they should refrain from expressing their dissatisfaction through the use of aggressive language.

Some argued that parliamentarians could contribute to changing of the negative public discourse on normalization and to improving the already reached agreements and their implementation. A speaker noted that some of agreements made the lives of the people even harder, some are untenable, and many of those have not even been implemented. Specifically, the speaker singled out the agreement on the freedom of movement which created many new hurdles for Kosovo drivers, including not recognizing Kosovo RKS license plates and ID cards, but rather replacing them with some temporary Serbian papers. In addition, it also makes the origin of the drivers stand out. If you drive from Merdare with a temporary Serbian “proba” paper license plate, it is obvious that you are a Kosovar driver.

Some speakers were against the Brussels dialogue for the reason that “the sides are unequal.” For instance, Kosovo recognizes Serbia, but Serbia doesn’t recognize Kosovo. The European Union recognizes Serbia, but it doesn’t fully recognize Kosovo.

Minority integration

Many speakers noted their objections to referring to ethnic communities as minorities, as it implies exclusion, and suggested to simply refer them as communities. The lack of Serb integration in Kosovo remains a major obstacle to normalization of relations between the two societies. Belgrade insists on the implementation of the agreement on establishing the Association/Community of the Serb-majority Municipalities while Kosovo’s governments says it should be based on the Kosovo Constitutional Court’s decision. At the same time, Kosovo’s largest opposition party, the Self-Determination Movement, is altogether against the formation of the Association/Community.

A speaker said that the people in Kosovo are against the Association/Community and the government is obliged to respect the will of the people. Furthermore, the speaker said that the Association/Community would not integrate the Serbs but rather create segregation and undermine Kosovo’s central institutions, especially in the north. The Serbs strongly believe that the Association/Community would safeguard their interests and rights in Kosovo. One Serbian participant said that it is difficult for Belgrade to trust the Brussels process and show good will if the Association/Community is not established more than three years after the April 2013 agreement.

The rights of the Albanian minority in south Serbia was another issue discussed at the roundtable. A speaker said that Belgrade should give them the same rights it wants for the Serbs in Kosovo. Another speaker who had recently visited the majority-Albanian areas in Serbia spoke of much higher unemployment rate than the Serbian average and of the lack of economic opportunities, adding that the level of the government investment is also a lot lower than the Serbian average. Also, the Albanians there have not been able to use textbooks from Kosovo,

and the speaker said this is a violation of basic human rights. “We have given Kosovo Serbs a double majority, while Albanians in Serbia can’t get even books from Kosovo.”

Many said that politicians should be frank to their communities, and help them integrate into their respective societies rather than use them to advance their political and individual objectives. They also said that the full implementation of the agreements and improvement of relations between Belgrade and Pristina would also ease ethnic tensions in Serbia and in Kosovo.

Missing persons

According to the Humanitarian Law Center, from January 1998 to December 1999 there were 13,146 killed and missing in Kosovo. Among those 10,495 are Albanians, 2,077 are Serbs, and are 574 others. Today there remain over 1,650 missing persons. The participants encouraged a public discourse and initiatives on all sides that take into account victims of all ethnicities. They pointed out that contrary to such an approach photos of only ethnic Albanian missing persons are currently placed in front of the Kosovo parliament and only Serbs in front of the Serbian parliament.

There was a consensus that the Kosovo and Serbian governments could do more to uncover the fate of the remaining missing persons by providing more financial resources, sharing information about potential gravesites, and increase cooperation and coordination of their delegations to the Working Group on Missing Persons.

A number of participants also recommended that the issues be addressed between the two governments in the Brussels dialogue.

Though there was broad consensus that the issue is politically sensitive, they encouraged their governments to address it as a humanitarian issue so as to make the cooperation more effective.

Some speakers said that the conclusion of this issue would not only bring to end the pain of the missing persons families but also contribute to the normalization and reconciliation of Serb and Albanian societies.

In parallel with the efforts to uncover the fate of the missing, the justice systems should intensify their efforts to find and prosecute the perpetrators.

Conclusion

The participants offered a number of recommendations in the area of education, sports, culture, and other social activities that would contribute to the normalization of relations between the two societies.

- **Replicate the cooperation between Kosovo’s and Serbia’s chambers of commerce.** Participants suggested inviting representatives of the chambers of commerce to the next roundtable to discuss their approach of cooperation and how they handle political hurdles, especially those related to the status issue. Many speakers said that focusing on economic

cooperation and trade should take precedence over political issues because these are areas that produce immediate benefits and connect people.

- **Offer opportunities to learn Albanian for the Serbs in Kosovo.** Speaking Albanian would not only improve social relations between Serbs and Albanians but would also create better employment opportunities for the Kosovo Serbs, especially in the private sector. Currently, there are very few Serbs employed in private companies
- **Establish an exchange program between the University of Belgrade and the University of Pristina.** Cooperation on education is an area where cooperation is more likely since it is not too politically sensitive. Though Serbia does not recognize the University of Pristina, it was recommended that the heads of the two universities find ways to circumvent political hurdles and establish such a program.
- **Organize a football match between former players of Partisan and Pristina football teams.** There was consensus that normalization of relations requires communication between all sections of societies, not only between the two governments, it was recommended to organize such a football match to promote reconciliation and better social relations.
- **Organize joint government meetings.** Though a far-fetched idea for the moment, a speaker suggested a joint meeting of Kosovo and Serbian governments, similar to the Kosovo government's meetings with those of Macedonia and Albania or Serbia's with those of Hungary and Romania.
- **Organize joint visits of MPs in Kosovo and Serbia.** Members of Parliaments could organize joint visits to Albanian areas in Serbia and Serb areas in Kosovo. The objective of such visits is to get informed directly about the challenges facing the communities and promote more social interaction.

The participants discussed the possibility of issuing a joint statement on the missing persons. They had broad agreement on the content of a statement drafted during the discussions but were not able to reach consensus on some of the wording and ideas proposed in the statement.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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Besim Beqaj, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Gordana Comic, Deputy Speaker, Parliament of Serbia, Democratic Party
Blerta Deliu Kodra, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic Party of Kosovo
Aida Derguti, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Self-Determination Movement
Arben Gashi, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Fatmir Hasani, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Party for Democratic Action
Teuta Haxhiu, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo
Donika Kadaj Bujupi, Member of the Parliament of Kosovo, Self-Determination Movement
Nada Lazic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina
Vladimir Marinkovic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Social Democratic Party of Serbia
Aleksandar Markovic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Vladimir Orlic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party
Branko Ruzic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia
Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Adriatik Kelmendi, Senior Producer, TV Kohavision
Arber Kuci, Representative in Kosovo, Council for Inclusive Governance
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Milivoje Mihajlovic, Director, Radio Beograd
Sanja Ivacic Perovic, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Beta
Jean-Daniel Ruch, Ambassador of Switzerland to Serbia and to Montenegro
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