

Parliaments and Normalization of Relations

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized its fifth roundtable for members of parliaments of Serbia and Kosovo on October 8-9, 2016 in Mavrovo, Macedonia. The parliamentarians discussed ways to contribute to resolving the outstanding disputes between Pristina and Belgrade and strengthen their effectiveness and influence in decision-making.

The roundtable was part of a larger CIG project on relations between Belgrade and Pristina supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Serbia and Kosovo have specific interests and objectives in normalizing their relations: Serbia hopes to gain EU membership and improve political and economic relations with the EU. Kosovo hopes to conclude the process with membership in international organizations and eventual recognition by Belgrade. Belgrade is in favor of normalization but opposes Kosovo's membership in major international organizations and says it will not recognize Kosovo. The dream of a European future is perhaps the only common vision and often just declaratory rather than substantive. Different visions of dialogue and different expectations lead to a non-existent normalization. In this context of conflicting goals, many participants said that Pristina and Belgrade should "rationalize debate, rationally articulate their opportunities, and decrease their inflammatory rhetoric."

Normalization between Serbia and Kosovo remains complicated also by "abnormal" domestic political dynamics. Therefore, normalization of relations between governing and opposition parties in both Pristina and Belgrade is essential for building national consensus to take difficult decisions, which, some speakers said all know what they are: Serbia will have to give up Kosovo, while Kosovo will have to offer the additional rights to Kosovo Serbs through the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities. In addition to building national or at least interparty consensus, the international community, primarily the EU, should become engaged more substantially in mediating an agreement that closes all the disputes. Many said that the Brussels dialogue has produced good results and built a solid foundation for reaching an agreement that must address the status issue.

This report's conclusions and recommendations 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 discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

Conclusions and recommendations

The two-day discussion has been summarized in a number of conclusions and recommendations, some of which had consensus and some had majority opinion.

1. The status dispute and the narrative of the past remain major obstacles to moving towards comprehensive normalization and reconciliation between the two societies. The format, substance, and the goals of the Brussels dialogue should be restructured to include the status issue. Parliamentarians could encourage and support rational debates about the past, including a recognition of crimes committed by their own sides, and thus directly contribute to the reconciliation process. Some speakers said that it would be difficult to make significant progress towards reconciliation "as long as we have leaderships connected to the wars themselves," a condition which does not allow to articulate a rational explanation of what happened during the war. It was suggested that the talks should be held with the goal of Kosovo and Serbian societies living together in the future rather than separately.
2. Normalization of relations between governing and opposition parties in Kosovo and Serbia is essential for building national support for the resolution of the remaining disputes. Many speakers said that the governing parties not only did not make any effort to include those from the opposition in the process, but also kept them in the dark about the negotiations and the agreements. However, some said that many members of parliaments in Kosovo and Serbia have been indifferent to the dialogue and made few efforts to compel the government to report more often and in detail. Some speakers reported that a serious discussion of the Brussels dialogue in the Serbian parliament is a taboo topic and that the parliamentarians receive no official documents or reports from the negotiators. Some reported that the situation in Kosovo's parliament is more or less similar.
3. A speaker suggested forming a group of parliamentarians from Kosovo and Serbia to identify and articulate concrete issues and lobby jointly for their resolution. While he said that parliamentarians have no direct mechanisms to resolve problems, they have a strong voice and could have an impact on several areas. A number of speakers supported the idea of dealing more with specific issues, such as those heard by a number of parliamentarians in Velika Hoča/Hoča e Madhe, during a visit to the majority-Serb village. However, a number of other speakers were skeptical about the potential results of such a group. They agreed to discuss the merits of this proposal in a future meeting.

4. Parliamentarians in Kosovo and Serbia should do a “scanning of the dialogue and the agreements” and prepare a document where they could set some principles and identify areas of cooperation between Belgrade and Pristina. In other words, parliamentarians should become more active, constantly pressuring the governments to report to them rather than “just waiting quietly for government officials to come to them,” which rarely happens.
5. Parliamentarians should help increasing political awareness about the dialogue of their societies. Some speakers said that the public awareness and understanding is already increasing. “More and more people in Serbia believe the Kosovo issue should be resolved fully, while more and more in Kosovo support Serb accommodation.” However, the parliamentarians could accelerate the process through more interactions with their constituencies.
6. Kosovo Serbs should be included in the dialogue. Some speakers said that Pristina has not invited Kosovo Serb representatives to become part of its team. Kosovo Serbs have been involved indirectly with Belgrade’s team. A speaker said that Pristina should understand that Belgrade is important for Kosovo Serbs not only financially, but also emotionally.
7. The role of the European Union should go beyond that of a soft facilitator; it should find ways to also impose some solutions in areas where Pristina and Belgrade fail to agree. Some speakers argued that the international community has also been sidelining “politicians with common sense” and only works with those it thinks can deliver. But those that can “deliver” care more about maintaining their own power than about bringing solutions to the problems, a number of speakers argued.
8. Rule of law and joint fight against organized crime should be among the most important topics to be discussed in Brussels.
9. Parliamentarians should look into the possibility of establishing cooperation between Academies of Sciences of Kosovo and Serbia.
10. A few suggested organizing a joint meeting of the Governments of Serbia and Kosovo.
11. A number of parliamentarians reported about their visit to Velika Hoča/Hoča e Madhe, a Serb village of about 700 people, where they had lunch with about fifteen residents and visited a number of local businesses. The Velika Hoca residents reported that the village offers no prospects for the young, and that most of them are leaving. The small businesses face challenges such as difficulties in finding markets for their products. In addition to regular problems that other communities face (unemployment, inadequate economic development, prevalence of garbage, quality of

education, lack of medications, etc.), they said that they still do not have access to some of their private property that remains usurped by their Albanian neighbors. Given their small voting base, they did not manage to get representatives in their municipality's (Rahovec/Orahovac) local assembly. However, some residents are employed in the municipal institutions. The local residents called on the parliamentarians, and specifically on the Serb List representatives, to make more frequent visits to village, get informed about their problems, and resolve them through institutional mechanisms.

In conclusion, the participants agreed to address the missing persons' issue and the cooperation between the Chambers of Commerce of Kosovo and Serbia in the next meeting.

Participants

Balsa Bozovic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Democratic Party
Sadri Ferati, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Arben Gashi, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Teuta Haxhiu, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo
Enver Hoti, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, NISMA
Aleksandra Jerkov, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Democratic Party
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
Snezana Paunovic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia
Nenad Rasic, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Serb List
Branko Ruzic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia
Armend Zemaj, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo
Belul Beqaj, Professor and Doctor of Political Science, Pristina
Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Philippe Guex, Ambassador of Switzerland to Serbia and to Montenegro
Arber Kuci, Representative in Kosovo, Council for Inclusive Governance
Jean-Hubert Lebet, Ambassador of Switzerland to Kosovo
Igor Novakovic, Representative in Serbia, Council for Inclusive Governance