

Towards a Successful Serbian Internal Dialogue on Kosovo

In May 2017, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic announced an internal dialogue on Kosovo to elicit institutional and grassroots input and feedback on how to conclude the Kosovo conflict. The process was informally kicked off later in the summer through a series of op-ed articles in which Mr. Vucic and a number of senior government officials presented their views but did not offer details. Only a few opposition representatives responded positively to the initiative, publishing their own comments and opinions. The overwhelming majority of the opposition is sceptical about the dialogue and refuse to participate. As of this report's writing in late October this is where the process of the internal dialogue stands so far. Both the president and the government have not come out with more precise information on how the dialogue will be organized, by whom, and how the entire idea will be implemented.

To provide more clarity on this issue, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on October 9, 2017 in Belgrade its first in a series of roundtables devoted to the internal dialogue in Serbia. The meeting gathered representatives of Serbia's leading civil society organizations, academic community, media, as well as Kosovo Serb civil society representatives. The meeting touched upon the issues that should be included in the dialogue, the methodology for conducting and concluding the process, and establishing its main principles.

The roundtable is a part of CIG's broader initiative dedicated to the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The report recommendations and conclusions are based on roundtable discussions and individual meetings. They are 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 report has not been reviewed by the participants. The discussions were held under the Chatham House rule. CIG Associate in Belgrade Igor Novakovic drafted the report.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Most of the roundtable participants welcomed the initiative, adding that principles and clear rules for conducting such a dialogue should be defined from the start. The meeting resulted in the following conclusions and recommendations about the principles and rules for conducting the internal dialogue.

- **The dialogue needs clear purpose and goals.** At present, it is still unclear what the dialogue is about and what its goals are. The society is not prepared for the continuation of the dialogue with Pristina and does not understand the substance of normalization. Hence the purpose of the dialogue should be to allow the society to prepare better for the upcoming process and for opening of the most relevant issues. With that in mind, the objectives of the dialogue must be clearly defined from the outset, essentially addressing the core of the dispute, which is the status of Kosovo. Some of the participants expressed the opinion that the current approach serves as a “smoke screen” for the ruling elite to complete the process started with the 2013 Brussels Agreement. Several others claim that “theses tactics” are applied because the ruling elite does not want to be the “sole decision maker” on Kosovo, and wants to share the responsibility to avoid an eventual stigmatization. But if either is true that means that Serbia has to offer more concessions than it already has given with the Brussels Agreement. A speaker said that the internal dialogue should not be focused on how to bring back or save Kosovo but on how and why Serbia has lost Kosovo.
- **The internal dialogue influences Serbia’s EU future and thus should address issues related to the negotiation process under Chapter 35.** Serbia is obliged to respect the framework of Chapter 35 which foresees a comprehensive normalization between Belgrade and Pristina. Therefore, some participants see it as a crucial framework for the internal dialogue too, as it was the main catalyst for the very beginning of the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina and remains the main driver for the entire process. From that perspective, the scope of the internal debate is limited when it comes to the Belgrade-Pristina relations, since the comprehensive normalization entails, at its very least, a peaceful coexistence, full scale cooperation, mutual recognition of the legal systems and acceptance of Pristina’s membership in international organisations. “However, other elements, not exclusively related to the Belgrade-Pristina relations, should be also a part of the internal dialogue,” several participants claimed, “since the process is in fact about the destiny of Serbia and the vision of its future.”
- **The dialogue should produce qualitatively new proposals on relations between Belgrade and Pristina.** A dialogue that results in repeating old positions would not contribute to the improvement of relations or to the resolution of the existing disputes between Pristina and Belgrade. The dialogue should address issues of complete implementation of the Brussels Agreement, the missing persons, IDPs and returns, usurped private property, the Serb cultural and historical heritage in Kosovo, and Kosovo's membership in international organizations. However, mutual cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo and the duration of the current EU-facilitated dialogue need to be discussed as well. Therefore, the dialogue should be structured in such a way that the participants are encouraged to speak freely and bring up “out of the box” ideas, taboo and stigmatized topics.
- **The dialogue should clarify what the overall normalization of relations means.** Inevitably, the internal dialogue has to address options for settling the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Some participants said that it is not enough to have just a European perspective or the fast track EU integration as incentives for Serbia, and claimed that the internal dialogue would most probably result in a proposal for a partition of Kosovo or an exchange of territories. Others were sceptical about these options and said that Serbia at best could normalize relations without recognizing Kosovo. In any case, the majority of participants agreed that the government has changed its approach to Kosovo-related issues—

when it came to power in 2012 the official focus was on the position of the Serbs in Kosovo and now it has switched (again) to the territorial discourse.

- **It is necessary to specify the methodology for interpreting results of the dialogue, reporting to the public, the decision-making and clear deadlines.** It is unclear how the organizers will process outcomes of the internal dialogue and who and how will decide about its final results. Participants brought up various options mentioning that decisions could be made by the president, the government or the parliament or could be subject to a referendum. It is still unclear who is tasked with reporting about the dialogue's outcome and if they show a plurality of options or a single decision. The dialogue also needs a roadmap with clearly articulated concrete phases and deadlines.
- **Transparency of the dialogue.** Different formats of the dialogue should be taken into account. Should it be open or should some stages of the dialogue be carried out under the Chatham House rule? Confidentiality can be positive as it could resolve the issue of safeguarding the space for dialogue and the issue of the negative influence of the media. It would also enable opening of the most difficult issues in a safe way for the participants. Rules of reporting to be public need to be discussed at the outset of the dialogue and clearly defined.
- **An atmosphere of dialogue has to be promoted by the media as a precondition for a successful internal dialogue.** Currently the Brussels dialogue is in a partial stalemate, poised with the stop and go implementation of the agreed elements, as well as with the fiery rhetoric based on conflicting interpretations of the agreements. This situation is further stirred up by the Serbian media reporting which has been extremely one-sided and has not offered an explanation of the context in which the dialogue is being conducted nor of the substance of normalization. The public is not prepared for the internal dialogue and does not believe that a secured dialogue space exists. Hence, the media reporting on the Brussels dialogue and on the Serb-Albanian relations in general must become more informative, analytical, impartial, and balanced. This is a basic precondition for preparing the population for the outcomes of the internal dialogue and eventual new brave solutions.
- **A successful dialogue must be inclusive of different kinds of opinions.** The opposition and the civil society in Serbia should take part in the dialogue ensuring that all relevant social structures and their positions are included. The dialogue organizers should invite all potential relevant stakeholders to participate in the dialogue, while guaranteeing the security of the dialogue space and an impartial media reporting. If this is not the case, a historic opportunity to formulate a common position on the issue of Serbia-Kosovo relations will be missed. The dialogue among politicians should be conducted within the institutions, especially inside the parliament, rather than through the media, and the dialogue organisers have full responsibility in this regard. Regardless of whether the representatives of the opposition participate in the dialogue or not, the civil society must be ready to take part and offer their input. The dialogue cannot be conducted without the Kosovo Serbs. Representatives of their different political options and of their civil society must have a place at the table.
- **The opposition does not have the luxury to stay out of the dialogue and Kosovo-related issues.** If the opposition does not want to take part in the government-led internal dialogue, it should initiate its own parallel process to determine its and the society's positions on key issues. The opposition can show the government how such a dialogue should be organized if it is unsatisfied with the official process, but standing aside on a key issue for the country is

not an option. This dialogue is not just about the issue of Kosovo, it is much larger and goes into the essence of Serbia's own future and its democratic development.

- **The issue of the Serb-Albanian reconciliation is fundamental in the overall context but it should not be a topic of the internal dialogue as it will unnecessarily burden it.** The objective of the internal dialogue should be an operational task to determine Belgrade's position towards a comprehensive normalization with Pristina. Reaching a comprehensive agreement, however, will open doors to reconciliation with the Kosovo Albanians.

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