

Towards a Successful Serbian Internal Dialogue on Kosovo

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized in Belgrade on November 30, 2017 its second roundtable on Serbia's internal dialogue on Kosovo. The meeting gathered representatives of Serbia's leading civil society organizations, academic community, and media. The discussions focused on the preliminary options articulated so far and on ways to include in the dialogue the Kosovo status issue.

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

To bring additional clarity on the questions raised in the October 2017 CIG-organized roundtable on the internal dialogue* CIG asked for input from the Working Group tasked with providing support to conduct the dialogue (herewith the Working Group). The Group is led in its work by the Office for Kosovo of the Government of Serbia.

The internal dialogue, it was explained, consists of two types of events: those officially organized by the Working Group and those prepared by other organizations. However, only the events that are organized with or in coordination with the Working Group are presented to the public as a part of the official dialogue. The Working Group extrapolates ideas into a report, which will be presented to the president and the government by March 2018. The institutions then are supposed to use the internal dialogue's conclusions to build a platform for negotiations with Pristina.

The dialogue (seven events until the moment of writing of this report, including three official roundtables) so far resulted in a wide spectrum of options for resolving the Kosovo issue, but they can be summed up in four basic categories, according to the dialogue organizers.

- 1) Serbia should not give up Kosovo and do whatever is possible to bring it back under its fold;
- 2) Serbia should strive to keep the conflict frozen until a more favorable geopolitical climate for Serbia is created;
- 3) Serbia should continue negotiating with Pristina and reach agreements related to comprehensive normalization but not address the status issue;
- 4) Different modalities of recognition of Kosovo's independence.

* For further information see <http://www.cigonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Towards-a-Successful-Serbian-Internal-Dialogue-on-Kosovo-ENG-1.pdf>

The recommendations and conclusions presented in this report resulted from the roundtable discussions and from the information obtained by CIG from individual and small group meetings in Belgrade. They 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. The report was drafted by Igor Novakovic, CIG Associate in Belgrade, and has not been reviewed by the participants.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. The Working Group should identify further steps in the ongoing negotiations with Pristina. The purpose of this process is to allow Belgrade to permanently stabilize its relations with Pristina and to proceed with its EU integration.
2. The key challenge for discussing the status issue is the interpretation of what the reality in Kosovo is and what the interests of Serbia in that regard are. There is a visible disagreement among the elite and the public in Serbia about these two issues, thus undermining chances for a national consensus. The participants expressed different and often conflicting opinions on the issue of debating the status: a) Serbia should be able to deal with the issue of status since the government is stable and has over 50 percent of popular support despite its previous moves on Kosovo. Serbia should have solved the issue of Kosovo “yesterday” because there are many more important issues that the country has to deal with, such as the economy and unemployment, b) it is not the time to deal with Kosovo’s status issues. Belgrade and Pristina should instead focus on solving practical issues, such as opening borders for free movement of goods and people.
3. Consensus (or at least awareness) exists regarding some related issues among the Serbian elite and public, such as the fact that there is no possibility for Serbia to establish an effective rule over Kosovo again, and to integrate the Kosovo Albanians into its society. Another point of consensus is about the cultural heritage and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo—they must be protected and preserved under a solution that surpasses the provisions of the Ahtisaari plan.
4. Lack of consensus about the status issue brings Serbia to basically two possible solutions: “freezing” of the status quo or an “elastic” solution on normalization that would not include recognition. The main reason why Serbia cannot officially recognize Kosovo is the feeling of defeat and humiliation among the population if that happens. Humiliation is not just caused by the defeat(s) in the 1990s and the way the declaration of independence happened, but it is also instigated by with the fact that there are still three critical issues which are not being properly addressed (from the point of view of the citizens of Serbia): a) usurped properties in Kosovo, b) status of the cultural heritage and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, and c) war crimes against the Serbs in Kosovo. In addition, the majority of the Serbian citizens feel that during the past seventeen years, Kosovo elite did not manage to prove that they want and are able to achieve a democratic and inclusive society based on rule of law, especially when it comes to actual implementation of the Constitution and laws regarding the status of Serbs and other minorities. Some participants claimed that the internal dialogue is prompted by foreign pressure and is only focused on the issue of status, while other urgent problems remain off the agenda, like the above-mentioned three points.

5. It would be hard to consider possible options without taking into account the framework of Chapter 35 of Serbia's EU accession negotiations, and for this reason the Serbian institutions should be more transparent about the implications of Chapter 35. Serbia has committed to engage in a process aiming to reach a comprehensive normalization agreement with Kosovo and that it would not create obstacles for Kosovo in its EU process. It is important to emphasize that almost every other aspect of negotiations urges Serbia to regulate its relations with Kosovo. E.g., Serbia will have to define where its borders are. Therefore, from this standpoint of Serbia's EU integration processes, there are only two viable options: a) to fully normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia based on the model that is similar to the one reached between two Germanys in 1972; b) recognition of Kosovo's independence. However, some participants claimed that the dilemma "Kosovo or the EU" is wrong, since for Serbia Kosovo represents its identity and the EU represents its future, and Serbia cannot give up on either of them.
6. Some roundtable participants recommended that the parliament and the political parties should be included in the dialogue. Some said that it is logical to include the parliament at the conclusion of the process to debate its outcomes. Others, however, disagreed that key participants in the dialogue should be the political parties, arguing that it would lead to the politicization of the debate.
7. The "internal dialogue" events should have more focused discussions, agendas, and the organizers should present to the participants lists of concrete topics. Furthermore, the events should have a space for debate and a direct exchange of opinions. The Working Group should offer the conclusions from each of the roundtables to the participants in these events. The consequence of the current approach is that most of the contributions and the inputs from the three official roundtables were in a sharp contrast to the purpose of the internal dialogue as it was expressed in the opinion piece published by President Vucic himself: "We need altogether to find an answer that will be lasting, that will exclude conflict as an option and that will bring benefits to everyone in the region."

Participants

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