

Kosovo Serbs and Serbia's Internal Dialogue

Introduction

Kosovo Serbs are following Serbia's internal dialogue on Kosovo with interest. What do Kosovo Serbs think about the dialogue? How do they see its outcomes? What options do they recommend? These were some of the questions a group of Kosovo Serbs addressed at a roundtable in Gracanica, Kosovo, on December 4, 2017. The roundtable is part of a project on relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The roundtable was organized by the Council for Inclusive Governance and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The participants argued that a final settlement of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute would benefit Pristina, Belgrade, and the Serb community in Kosovo. They support Belgrade's internal Kosovo dialogue initiative and hope that Kosovo Serb interests would be taken into account. Ideal options for a final settlement do not exist. Kosovo's return under Serbian jurisdiction, Serbia's favorite option, is not possible. Serbia's outright recognition of Kosovo, Kosovo's favorite option, is not likely either. So both sides should aim for a political compromise that brings to an end the decades-long conflict. But what should this political compromise look like? Kosovo Serbs do not have a detailed answer either. But they would prefer an option that brings comprehensive normalcy to the relations between Belgrade and Pristina and that safeguards their rights and guarantees some degree of self-governance through the establishment of the Association/Community of the Serb-Majority Municipalities. Kosovo Serbs are mostly concerned about resolution of their concrete problems, especially of healthcare and education.

The majority of Kosovo Serbs, however, hope that "nothing changes," a speaker said. "Fear dominates their thinking." They believe some agreement will be reached but are anxious about its effect on them. Many feel it is better to support the status quo than an unpredictable change. The speaker argued that the Brussels dialogue didn't change the situation for the better: it has strengthened some groups, especially those in power, but weakened the societies. The societies should have their own positions and be influential in shaping the official positions. The Kosovo Serb society is an important player but is left out of the process. Some speakers said that Belgrade should include Kosovo Serbs in its internal dialogue.

Final settlement scenarios

Participants argued that a final settlement between Pristina and Belgrade is inevitable. The international community is running out of time and patience and might increase its pressure on the sides. Belgrade is checking its options and possibilities through its internal dialogue and also trying to find out how far it can go.

There was consensus among the participants that any option should include the formation of the Association/Community.

Freeze the status quo: Maintaining the existing relations is perhaps the least likely option, mostly because it incurs a high cost for both Belgrade and Pristina. Belgrade's path to EU membership will most likely be frozen too. Chapter 35 clearly and decisively conditions Serbia's EU integration with comprehensive normalization of relations with Kosovo. Status quo does not benefit Pristina either. It would mean that the north's integration would also be frozen and Kosovo's European integration prospect would become even more distant.

Partition or exchange of territories: It is also not a likely option, mostly because the international community is determined not to allow border changes in the region, largely because of regional security implications. A speaker said that the classic partition whereby Serbia incorporates Kosovo's north is not likely, but what he called a "soft partition of the north" is becoming a reality. A soft partition means that the north remains under Serbia's de facto control, but de jure the institutions operate within Kosovo's legal framework, allowing Kosovo officials to claim control of the territory. Also, classic partition would be the worst option for the Serbs in the south. Many say that under the partition scenario, the rights of the Serb community—guaranteed parliamentary and government seats, employment quota, double parliamentary majority—may be suspended. Exchange of territories is even a riskier option. It may start with Kosovo and Serbia, but most likely will end up with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. But even if it remains limited to Kosovo and Serbia, the exchange of territories option would inevitably lead to a massive population movement. Many say this would also lead to a new violent conflict in the region.

Normalization without recognition: This option includes Kosovo's de facto recognition but officially Serbia remains against independence. Serbia, however, will have to shut down its parallel institutions in Kosovo. It is the most likely scenario. It seems that under this scenario, Serbia would be able to join the EU and normalize relations with Kosovo without alienating the Serbian public. The international community also seems to support such an option. Pristina might not be happy but it would have no choice if the option is supported by the US and EU. Under this scenario, Belgrade and Pristina continue their Brussels dialogue to address the remaining disputes and reach a final settlement that satisfies the criteria for European integration. The final outcome of this scenario would be membership for Serbia in the EU, a guaranteed prospect for Kosovo's EU integration and membership in international organizations, as well as removal of all political restrictions in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

Recognition of independence: Recognition, according to the participants, is not a likely option, at least not in the short and medium term. Also, a speaker said that Serbia's potential recognition of Kosovo is not as important as many make it sound. Serbia's recognition does not guarantee UN membership, EU membership, or recognition of Kosovo by the five EU member states. There are different sets of criteria for EU membership; UN seat depends on other countries, and the five EU members do not recognize Kosovo because of their internal issues, not because of their solidarity with Serbia. Some said that perhaps a strong Association/Community could be formed in exchange for recognition. Some participants pointed out that establishing a strong Association/Community is a much better option than the north's much coveted partition idea.

Despite the international efforts to begin the process for reaching a final settlement, Pristina and Belgrade seem to be asking for more time. Pristina because it has a weak government, which might even get weaker by day, and Belgrade because it is not ready to make more compromises. Belgrade and Pristina are asking for more time, but, many speakers concluded, the international community doesn't have "unlimited time," and that is why makes a final agreement likely in the medium term.

Participants

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Oliver Ivanovic, Chairman, Civic Initiative Serbia, Democracy, Justice

Dalibor Jevtic, Minister for Communities and Return of Kosovo

Nemanja Jovanovic, Political Advisor, OSCE Mission in Kosovo

Dragisa Krstovic, Former Member of Parliament of Kosovo

Ljubisa Mijacic, Analyst, Zubin Potok

Slavisa Mladenovic, Language Commissioner, Government of Kosovo

Branislav Nesovic, Political Advisor, UNMIK

Jovana Radosavljevic, Director, New Social Initiative

Nenad Radosavljevic, Board Chairman, Network of Serb TV stations in Kosovo

Lazar Rakic, Executive Director, Mediation Center Mitrovica

Zivojin Rakocevic, Director, Cultural Center in Gracanica

Momcilo Trajkovic, President, Forum of Kosovo Serbs

Sanja Sovrlic, Journalist, RTV Mir

Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Jean-Hubert Lebet, Ambassador of Switzerland to Kosovo

Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Kuno Schlaefli, First Secretary-Human Security Advisor, Embassy of Switzerland in Kosovo